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JESUS, TRANSCENDENCE AND GENEROSITY
Reading the Christologies of Hans Frei and Dietrich Bonhoeffer Together

by

Tim R. Boniface

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy.

Durham University

Department of Theology and Religion

2016

Abstract

JESUS, TRANSCENDENCE AND GENEROSITY

Reading the Christologies of Hans Frei and Dietrich Bonhoeffer Together

Tim R. Boniface

In contemporary scholarship, both Hans Frei (1922–1988) and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) are drawn upon by various scholars seeking to articulate a way between extremes such as fundamentalism, exclusivism or conservatism on one hand, and secularism, pluralism or liberalism on the other. This thesis argues that reading the Christologies of both theologians together towards a theology of the transcendence of Jesus points towards a robust answer to this question of a ‘middle way’ on which they are both put to use. Focussing on their remarkably similar Christological responses to what William Placher calls the domestication of transcendence, this thesis argues that Frei and Bonhoeffer complement and supplement one another’s work towards a theology of the transcendence of Jesus that is grounded in his unsubstitutable history-like identity as the crucified and risen one; and that this kind of theology is at the heart of what makes for what Frei calls a ‘generous orthodoxy’—i.e. a way between the various extremes mentioned above. After reading Frei and Bonhoeffer towards this end, the conclusion also suggests that such a theology derived from their Christologies should be supplemented with a more particular pneumatology, by virtue of which one is able to fully emphasise the broad generosity of God at the heart of a theology of Jesus’ transcendence.

Declaration

This work is submitted to Durham University in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It is my own work, no part of which has been previously submitted to any other university.

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List of Abbreviations

I have used abbreviations only to refer to the relevant volumes in the seventeen volume *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English* collection. Hans Frei's corpus is significantly shorter and does not appear in an equivalent collection, so I have referenced Frei's works separately in footnotes as any other work. The abbreviations for works by Bonhoeffer works used in the thesis are as follows:

- SC.* DBWE vol. 1. *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*. Translated by Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009.
- AB.* DBWE vol. 2. *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*. Translated by H. Martin Runscheidt. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009.
- CF.* DBWE vol. 3. *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*. Translated by Martin Rüter and Ilse Tödt. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997.
- D.* DBWE vol. 4. *Discipleship*. Translated by Green and Reinhard Krauss. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003.
- LT.* DBWE vol. 5. *Life Together; Prayerbook of the Bible*. Translated by Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005.
- E.* DBWE vol. 6. *Ethics*. Translated by Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West and Douglass W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009.
- LPFP.* DBWE vol. 8. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Translated by Isabel Best, Lisa Dahill, Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010.
- YB.* DBWE vol. 9. *The Young Bonhoeffer: 1918–1927*. Translated by Mary C. Nebelsick and Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003.
- BBNY.* DBWE vol. 10. *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1929–1931*. Translated by Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008.
- EAPW.* DBWE vol. 11. *Ecumenical, Academic and Pastoral Work: 1931–1932*. Translated by Annabel Schmidt-Lange with Isabel Best, Humphrey and Pauck. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012.
- B.* DBWE vol. 12. *Berlin 1932–1933*, Translated by Isabel Best and David Higgins, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009.
- TEF.* DBWE vol. 14. *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1953–1937*. Translated by Douglass Stott. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013.

TEU. DBWE vol. 15. *Theological Education Underground: 1937–1940*. Translated by Victoria Barnett, Claudia D. Bergman, Peter Frick and Scott A. More, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012.

Chapter 1.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis brings together work by Hans W. Frei (1922–1988) and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) on the question of the transcendence of Jesus, in relation to the contemporary attempt to counter both extreme theological closed-ness on one hand, and vacuous, non-descriptive openness on the other. In contemporary English language scholarship, both Frei and Bonhoeffer are drawn upon independently in the search for a ‘middle way’ between positions variously characterised as fundamentalism, exclusivism or conservatism on one side; and secularism, pluralism or liberalism on the other. I will argue that, beyond their important individual contributions, when Frei and Bonhoeffer are read together their work points towards a robust approach to this question of a ‘middle way’, based specifically upon an account of Jesus’ transcendence.

Engaging in this reading of Frei and Bonhoeffer also exposes a surprising lack of comparative work on the two. Not only are they currently being used in the same way, but their equally Christocentric works also contain significant parallels and potential for each to complement the other—more than can be brought to the surface in this project. Therefore, this thesis also advocates more explicitly comparative work on the two.

In the discussion of the ‘middle way’ referred to above, scholars draw upon many different elements of Frei or Bonhoeffer’s theology, and vary also in the terms used to describe the path that a middle way has to navigate. To provide a few examples regarding Bonhoeffer, Christiane Tietz argues that, on account of a “strong” orthodox Christological ontology, he is able to evidence a theology congenial to pluralism while focussed on the exclusivity of Christ.¹ Jennifer McBride suggests that a Christological model of repentance drawn from Bonhoeffer’s Lutheran Christology points towards a

¹ Christiane Tietz, ‘Bonhoeffer’s Strong Christology in the Context of Religious Pluralism’, in Clifford Green and Guy Carter (eds.), *Interpreting Bonhoeffer: Historical Perspectives, Emerging Issues* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 189, 195–196.

form of public witness that is “simultaneously non-triumphal and faithful”.² In 2009, following the 2008 International Bonhoeffer Congress, a whole volume was devoted to exploring how Bonhoeffer’s theology offers a “way between fundamentalism and secularism”, wherein, for example, Michael DeJonge suggests that Bonhoeffer’s “negotiation of oppositional pairs” maps a path between fundamentalism/sectarianism and secularism;³ Jens Zimmerman highlights how Bonhoeffer’s “Christological, incarnational humanism” illuminates “a religious alternative beyond secularism and fundamentalism” (or what he also calls “religious and secularist fundamentalisms”);⁴ and Philip Ziegler looks to the theological (especially eschatological) “character” of the “theme of secularity” in Bonhoeffer’s later writings, and finds there a promising way to counter fundamentalist or secular extremes.⁵ Elsewhere, Tom Greggs reads Bonhoeffer together with Barth, towards replacing “a dangerous vicious cycle of mutually reinforcing fundamentalisms with a virtuous cycle of more particularist but open expressions of faith.”⁶ In a more explicitly philosophical vein, Paul Janz draws upon Bonhoeffer as part of his attempt to articulate an alternative to both reductionism (the reduction of the transcendent to the immanent) and positivism (a theology of revelation utterly immune to rationale enquiry) concentrating particularly on Bonhoeffer’s *Act and Being*.⁷

Frei lends himself even more directly to this question, using the phrase “generous orthodoxy” to point to his desire to articulate something resembling “a voice between liberalism and fundamentalism”.⁸ The promise of this phrase has been recognised both specifically by contemporary Frei scholars and more generally by popular theology. Jason Springs outlines a contemporary set of dichotomies characterised by

² Jennifer M. McBride, *The Church for the World: A Theology of Public Witness* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), 9.

³ Michael P. DeJonge, ‘Between Fundamentalism and Secularism: Bonhoeffer’s Negotiation of Oppositional Pairs in *Ethics* and its Precedent in *Act and Being*’, in John DeGruchy, Stephen Plant, Christiane Tietz (eds.), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Theology Today: A Way Between Fundamentalism and Secularism* (München: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 2009), 75.

⁴ Jens Zimmerman, ‘Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christian Humanism in Philosophical and Theological Context’, in DeGruchy et al, *Bonhoeffer’s Theology Today*, 369.

⁵ Philip G. Ziegler, ‘Eschatology and Secularity in the Late Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’, in DeGruchy et al, *Bonhoeffer’s Theology Today*, 126.

⁶ Tom Greggs, *Theology Against Religion: Constructive Dialogues with Bonhoeffer and Barth* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 10.

⁷ Paul D. Janz, *God, the Mind’s Desire* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), 3–5.

⁸ Hans Frei, ‘Response to “Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal”’, in Hans Frei, *Theology and Narrative*, edited by George Hunsinger and William Placher (Oxford, OUP, 1993), 208.

the “distinctive and uncompromising” on one side, and those positions “so reserved and open-handed as to invite questions about what makes them theological at all” on the other. He suggests that Frei’s work—especially the technical philosophical implications of its cultural linguistic, Wittgensteinian dimension—offers “a wealth of resources with which to chart a path through these apparent dichotomies.”⁹ David Ford emphasises both a “diffidence” and “definiteness” in Frei’s work, linking it with Hardy’s concept of an Anglican “transcendent middle ... a more satisfactory and higher level appropriation of Christian truth than that attained by either ‘liberals’ or ‘conservatives’”, that allows for “contrast without either competition or loss of integrity.”¹⁰ Paul Schwartzentruber argues that Frei promotes a “hermeneutics of modesty” that makes for a theologically grounded co-existence of confidence and reserve in relation to the identity of Jesus,¹¹ and more generally, ‘Postliberal’ theology overall, for which Frei is understood to be a founding influence, seeks to generously inhabit particularity and flexibility.¹² Beyond the academic communities, Brian McLaren takes up the phrase ‘generous orthodoxy’ to express a theological middle way associated with the U.S. emerging church movement.¹³

My own purpose is less to explain how Frei and Bonhoeffer might be employed to critique one particular set of extremes, and more to demonstrate how bringing them together on the question of Jesus’ transcendence points towards a fruitful engagement with this ‘middle way’ question in its broad form. Therefore, wishing to steer clear of sociological analysis and specific critique of ‘fundamentalism’, ‘evangelicalism’, ‘sectarianism’, ‘liberalism’ or ‘secularism’ *per se*, I take up David Ford’s description of “closed” and “wide open” religion,¹⁴ which I use to refer to these various options for framing the ‘middle way’ question. Ford uses “closed” to point to “theologies with a heavy investment in telling members exactly what to believe and what to do, and in limiting any scope for questioning and exploring”; and “wide open” to describe theologies that are “so ... fluid, vague, or fragmented that they seem to lack the

⁹ Jason A. Springs, *Toward A Generous Orthodoxy: Prospects for Hans Frei’s Postliberal Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), 23.

¹⁰ David F. Ford, ‘Hans Frei and the Future of Theology’, *Modern Theology* (8, 1992), 204.

¹¹ Ronald T. Michener, *Postliberal Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 9.

¹² Paul Schwartzentruber, ‘The Modesty of Hermeneutics: The Theological Reserves of Hans Frei’, *Modern Theology* (8, 1992), 181–195.

¹³ Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 28.

¹⁴ David F. Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 70.

capacity to make definite affirmations ... [and] ... endlessly interrogative and experimental without ever being able to come to conclusions or to offer nourishing theological food for ordinary people.”¹⁵ These descriptions help us think in terms of characteristics rather than specific definitions, such that we might condense them to refer to extreme characteristics of ‘arrogance’ and ‘banality’, characteristics which one can expect the church to want to avoid.

The theological projects of both Frei and Bonhoeffer rest on a firm and explicitly confessional Christological basis. Each articulates Christology in a way that testifies to their markedly similar convictions, regarding the problems presented to Christology by the heritage of the Enlightenment, and also showing the determination that any critical response to this heritage must be adequately grounded in the historical. Both eschew simplistic notions of divine revelation, yet are equally committed to articulating the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the one in whom God acted and continues to act, in and for the world.

However, despite the close similarities in the way their theologies are grounded and put to use, there is little comparative work on Frei and Bonhoeffer together. Stephen Plant’s PhD thesis, for example, briefly examines Frei’s hermeneutics in relation to Bonhoeffer’s use of scripture in *Ethics*,¹⁶ but beyond that kind of brief undertaking, there is little explicit comparison, even when the two theologians are both drawn upon in a single work. Christopher Holmes’ *Ethics in the Presence of Christ*, for example, which clearly draws on the Christological convictions of both Frei and Bonhoeffer, stops short of commenting explicitly upon the fit between the two theologians.¹⁷ Bonhoeffer and Frei are both of great importance to two prominent contemporary theological voices—David Ford again, and Stanley Hauerwas—but neither concentrate on an explicit conversation between the two.¹⁸ These theologians have their own good

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Stephen Plant, *Uses of the Bible in the Ethics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, PhD thesis (Cambridge University: UK, 1993), 109–111.

¹⁷ Christopher R. J. Holmes, *Ethics in the Presence of Christ* (London: T&T Clark, 2012).

¹⁸ See, for example, David Ford, *Shaping Theology: Engagements in a Religious and Secular World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007). Ford’s essays engage consistently with both figures. On Frei in Ford see Tom Greggs, Rachel Muers, Simeon Zahl, ‘Introduction’, in Greggs, Muers and Zahl (eds.), *The Vocation of Theology Today: A Festschrift for David Ford* (Oregon: Cascade: 2013), 5–6. Notably, in ‘Hans Frei and the Future of Theology’, Ford coins the phrase “polyphonous future” to describe the way Frei’s theology was

reasons for not concentrating on the details of a Frei-Bonhoeffer comparison, so my describing the lack is not a criticism, but more an observation that there is work to be done. Perhaps most tantalising is that Frei himself alludes to Bonhoeffer once in an essay on transcendence in German theology, but casually aligns him with the secularisation movement in a way discredited by most contemporary scholarship.¹⁹ On the basis of this overall lack therefore, this thesis illuminates a connection waiting to be made, rather than forcing together two theologians with less than obvious association.

Synopsis

I aim to show that the question of the transcendence of Jesus, developed especially in response to post-Enlightenment epistemology, lies at the heart of what makes both Frei and Bonhoeffer promising for the pursuit of this ‘middle way’. After a general outline of the question of Christological transcendence, I present a reading of Frei, and then of Bonhoeffer, that allows their work to mutually inform and develop one another’s Christology towards an account of the paradoxical transcendence of Jesus, at the heart of which is his scandalous historical particularity. In general I set out Frei and Bonhoeffer’s work chronologically, as this allows for their similarities to be consistently perceived as they develop in the career of each theologian.

For the purpose of outlining a general discussion about transcendence and modernity, chapter 2 begins by drawing on William Placher’s thesis about the ‘domestication of transcendence’ from the seventeenth century onwards. Placher describes how a general turn to univocity in the seventeenth century domesticated God’s transcendence by constructing theological frameworks within the limits of a post-Enlightenment concept of universal rationality, and latterly how antipathy towards

“hospitable to many different methods, philosophies, church, anthropologies, cultures, periods, etc.” Ford, ‘Hans Frei’, 207. Regarding Hauerwas, Frei taught Hauerwas and remains for him a consistent reference point throughout many of his works (though not in an uncritical fashion), see especially Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (London: SCM, 1984), xxi, xxv; and Hauerwas, ‘The Church as God’s new language’, in Garrett Green, *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). On Bonhoeffer’s influence, see especially Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), chs. 2 and 3.

¹⁹ Hans W. Frei, ‘German Theology: Transcendence and Secularity’, in Charles E. McClelland and Steven P. Scher (eds.), *Postwar German Culture* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974), 105. See below, chapter 7.

that ‘domesticated’ version of God’s transcendence—in which God is all too easily identified with an overbearing ruler—leads to transcendence *per se* being rejected or radically reconfigured to the detriment of theology. Having supplemented Placher’s thesis with brief attention to postmodern theologians of transcendence, I turn explicitly to considering what is at play in the discussion of *Jesus*’ transcendence in particular, and conclude by drawing upon Ray S. Anderson’s somewhat neglected work *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God*, which, by articulating the incarnation as the “axiomatic penetration of God’s transcendence in the world”²⁰ highlights the centrality of *Jesus*’ historical particularity for a discussion of his transcendence.

Chapter 3 then introduces Frei in relation to this domestication of transcendence, and then specifically the transcendence of *Jesus Christ*: first with regard to Frei’s doctoral dissertation on Barth’s doctrine of revelation, then his critical engagement with the hermeneutics of the modern era (especially in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*) and finally his Christological response to that (especially in *The Identity of Jesus Christ*). Following Mike Higton, I note that, evident in Frei’s critique of Barth’s ‘epistemological monophysitism’ and his exposure of the captivity of hermeneutics to a dichotomy between faith and history, is his concern to do justice to the integrity of historicity whilst avoiding domesticating God ‘inside’ the categories of historical criticism and universal reason. Frei does this by contrasting a ‘pre-critical’ hermeneutic, in which historicity and figural (or typological) readings of scripture mutually support one another, with the hermeneutical tendencies that developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Frei’s constructive Christology, which emerges in response to these dichotomising tendencies, focusses upon the unsubstitutable identity of *Jesus* as rendered in the gospel narratives that narrate his identity in a wholly ‘history-like’ way, despite the fact that they push against or break the categories of post-Enlightenment historical criticism. At the heart of this Christology—beginning as it does from *Jesus* identity rather than his meaning or presence—is a union of transcendence with historical particularity: *Jesus* wholly-other-ness must be articulated at the level of what Frei calls his unsubstitutable identity. This approach to *Jesus*’ transcendence, developed in the context of Frei’s Anselmian ‘faith seeking understanding’, points towards a consistent confidence and humility in Christian

²⁰ Ray S. Anderson, *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God: A Christological Critique* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), 107.

witness—speaking concretely and particularly about the identity of Jesus Christ who cannot be resolved into categories of human epistemology, and yet encounters us in history. Taking cues from Frei’s brief pneumatological conclusion to *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, this chapter also introduces the suggestion (expanded in chapter 8) that a theology of the Holy Spirit supplements and strengthens the account of the transcendence of Jesus derived from Frei’s work.

Chapter 4 begins by elucidating Frei’s later cultural-linguistic focus upon the hermeneutical praxis of the Christian community, to describe how that community is ‘normed’ by the unsubstitutable transcendent person of Jesus Christ. In essays from the 1980s, Frei argues for the priority of a narrative reading of the Gospels, based not only upon features of the texts themselves, but upon how they are used by the community of faith. The hermeneutical priority of the unsubstitutable identity of Jesus, which Frei calls the *sensus literalis*, emerges from a complex interaction between community and text—an interaction that ultimately points to the activity of God in Christ upon the community. By supplementing Frei’s work with Richard Bauckham’s exploration of the category of testimony, we arrive at a rich account of the transcendence of Jesus in relation to the historically particular community of faith—where, once more, historical particularity is inseparable from Jesus’ ‘beyond-ness’ and ‘ungraspability’. Again, this chapter includes the suggestion that pneumatology is a necessary supplement to the account of Jesus’ unsubstitutable transcendence being derived from Frei’s work. Finally, we turn to Frei’s *Types of Christian Theology*, wherein the connection between the unsubstitutable transcendence of Jesus and a robustly flexible Christian theology is made most explicit, particularly in relation to how Frei understands the praxis of Christian theology to relate to other external academic disciplines and general categories of understanding. Overall, Frei refuses to compromise either on the particularity of Jesus, or on the *incapacity* of the general categories favoured by post-Enlightenment thought to contain or define Jesus. His particularity and his transcendence are, somehow, effectively one and the same.

Chapter 5 does for Bonhoeffer what part of chapter 3 did for Frei—i.e. positions him in relation to Placher’s narrative of the domestication of transcendence, thus enabling

the overlap between the two theologians to begin to emerge.²¹ Firstly, in Bonhoeffer's doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, he protests against modernity's exaltation of the 'I' as the ground of all epistemology, arguing instead that human beings receive their personhood from outside of themselves—in relation to others with whom we are in community, and ultimately in relation to God. He understands the church community as having its ground in the transcendent act of God in Christ, actualised by the work of the Holy Spirit who makes the church 'Christ existing as community'. Writing, like Frei, from the perspective of 'faith seeking understanding', Bonhoeffer rejects any ecclesiology that fails to locate the church's identity in the free activity of God's historical act in Christ. Secondly, Bonhoeffer's *Act and Being* demonstrates more explicitly his rejection of modernist epistemologies that imply the capability of human beings to place themselves into truth, and from there he elucidates the seeds of his own Christological theology of revelation. Notably, here Bonhoeffer relates to Barth's work in much the same way as Frei does—appreciating the turn away from modernism's domesticated transcendence, whilst at the same time critiquing the lack of real historical grounding in Barth's work. As Michael DeJonge in particular has shown, Bonhoeffer emphasises *person* as the key concept for a theology of revelation, accounting as it does for the contingent historicity of God's free act in Christ. Constructively, this chapter suggests that when Frei's concept of 'unsubstitutability' is drafted in to supplement Bonhoeffer's somewhat theoretical suggestions in *Act and Being*, the latter's concern to articulate Jesus' transcendence at the level of historical particularity is illuminated and strengthened.

Chapter 6 concentrates on the maturation of Bonhoeffer's *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross) in his Christology lectures of 1933, arguing that this can constitute his most significant contribution to the account of Jesus' transcendence derived from Frei's work. In comparison with Kierkegaard, in whose work the historicity of Christ's *incognito* somewhat falls by the way, Bonhoeffer elucidates a Lutheran *theologia crucis* that recognises the inseparability of the scandal of the crucified and risen Christ and his historical particularity. Bonhoeffer develops this point from a very similar

²¹ Whereas both Frei's critique of domesticated transcendence and his constructive Christological response are described in the same chapter (3) a whole chapter is devoted to the first aspect in Bonhoeffer. This is due to the extent of the material, and because the constructive Christology of Bonhoeffer's that I wish to concentrate on takes its more mature shape in his slightly later works, lending itself to extensive treatment in a separate chapter.

terminological basis as Frei's—i.e. focus upon the 'who' in Christology—but modifying Frei, he expounds this 'who' with startling attention to the identity of Christ as the one hidden in the humiliation of sinful flesh, whose identity as the risen one present now in word, sacrament and in community can never be detached from this scandalous hiddenness. I argue that if Bonhoeffer's *theologia crucis* is read with Frei's notion of unsubstitutability in mind, then not only is the coherence between Jesus' transcendence and his particularity better emphasised, but also Bonhoeffer's focus upon the 'difficulty' of the transcendent Christ who is *pro me* supplements Frei's Christology significantly towards a richer theology of Jesus' transcendence. Where Frei's brief allusion to Kierkegaard's notion of Jesus' 'incognito' is tantalisingly underdeveloped, Bonhoeffer's *theologia crucis* reflects upon the scandal of Jesus' historically particular incognito as the crucified and risen one. Here we encounter how Jesus' transcendence has the structure of an unsubstitutable paradox that makes for a humble and flexible approach to theology.

Chapter 7 elucidates how Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, and his theological letters from prison, serve to deepen reflection upon the coherence of Jesus' scandalous particularity with his transcendence, and in particular help to articulate how this kind of account makes for a way between extreme theological open-ness or closed-ness. Bonhoeffer's Christological participatory ontology in *Ethics* expounds the scandalous identity of Jesus Christ on a cosmic scale, envisioning ethical activity as participation in the reality of God's reconciliation with the world in the incarnate, crucified and risen one. Participation in this Christ-reality (*Christuswirklichkeit*) is never abstract, but a wholly 'worldly' affair, precisely because God's reconciling activity is itself 'worldly' as well as transcendent. When supplemented with Frei's concept of unsubstitutability, and also the latter's understanding of figural reading, Bonhoeffer's realist Christological ontology offers a powerful portrait of the all-embracing transcendence of the particular Jesus, in union with whom Christians are called to live responsibly towards the other. As well as the continuing suggestion that a *theologia crucis* is an important way in which Bonhoeffer supplements Frei, here Bonhoeffer's notions of ultimacy and penultimacy also serve to ontologically contextualise Frei's understanding of the relationship of theology to other external disciplines. Bonhoeffer's Christological ontology can therefore help to articulate what Frei calls a generous orthodoxy—i.e. a way between wide-open and closed religion—rooted in the coherence of historicity

and transcendence. In his letters from prison, Bonhoeffer returns explicitly to the theme of domesticated transcendence, critiquing the modernist obsession with God as a religious stop-gap in a way that chimes harmoniously with Frei's criticism of the subjection of Christology to general categories. Reflecting again their shared concern to avoid what Frei calls Barth's epistemological monophysitism (and what Bonhoeffer in the letters calls "a positivism of revelation")²² Bonhoeffer calls for an explicitly 'worldly' Christianity that is anything but a rejection of God's transcendence, but rather is the call for Christians to perceive afresh God's paradoxical strength in the weakness of Jesus' cross. Here, again, the truly transcendent God is Jesus Christ the unsubstitutable God-man for others, whose transcendence can only be explicated at the level of his scandalous historical particularity—i.e. as the crucified God-man. Once more, the confidence of Christian faith in witnessing to this particular figure as the one in whom God acts for our redemption, is in union with the incapacity of Christians to grasp or define him.

The concluding chapter first of all outlines three key overlaps between Frei and Bonhoeffer, and four key ways in which one strengthens or develops the concepts found in the other. I contend that on the basis of these points, a theology of the transcendence of Jesus derived from both Frei and Bonhoeffer is 'thicker' than one could derive from either theologian alone, and makes for a more theologically robust example of how Christology contributes to the potential for a way between wide-open and closed Christian theology. Both theologians point to the possibility of concrete, 'worldly' witness to the unsubstitutable person of Jesus, whose paradoxically scandalous historical particularity renders him out of the grasp of human beings, yet in whose being divinely *pro nobis* we find our possibility of life in God's reality. Secondly, my conclusion takes up the suggestions in chapters 3 and 4 that Frei's theology would benefit from pneumatological development, and recognises that whilst Bonhoeffer writes more on the Holy Spirit, this is underdeveloped as regards his *theologia crucis*. Drawing on Eugene Rogers and John V. Taylor in particular, I show how a more explicit articulation of the pneumatological dimension of the transcendence of Christ highlights the boundlessly generous activity of God in bestowing the identity of Christ by the Spirit without the loss of historical

²² *LPP*, 373.

particularity, and calls Christians to participation in the work of the Spirit, which is the theological locale for what Frei calls ‘generous orthodoxy’. In the final section, I offer a figural reading of John 20:19–23 to show how Jesus’ unsubstitutable and paradoxical transcendence is his being-towards-us as the wounded and risen one, who dismantles the domesticating epistemological structures and calls us to witness beyond them in the power of the Spirit. Finally, relating to the question of a middle way, this thesis is presented as a call to theological self-awareness—i.e. awareness that extreme open-ness or closed-ness in a Christian community might well be linked to its Christological presuppositions.

Chapter 2.

THE DOMESTICATION OF TRANSCENDENCE AND CHRISTOLOGY

Having suggested that a theology of Jesus' transcendence is an effective focal point for discussing Frei and Bonhoeffer's contribution to the question of a 'middle way' between what Ford calls wide-open and closed religion, here I briefly present some background to questions of transcendence and Christology as both theologians inherit and respond to them. For this, I turn initially to William Placher's book *The Domestication of Transcendence* (1997) which argues that an epistemological shift that he locates in the seventeenth century led to a failure to think theologically concerning "the mystery, the wholly otherness of God",¹ and that the subsequent way in which that otherness was misconstrued affects how the concept of transcendence is thought about today. Having laid out Placher's thesis and described some other examples of how modern and postmodern thinking about transcendence reflects this 'domestication', I will ask after the specifically Christological issues illuminated by this issue, and use that summary as the point of departure for the reading of Frei and Bonhoeffer that follows.

I

Modernity's Problem of Transcendence

In *The Domestication of Transcendence*, William Placher (1948–2008) outlines how the seeds of modernist epistemology which developed in the seventeenth century shaped the idea that God's 'transcendence' is something about God that a human being could master or define within categories of universal reason.² This contrasts starkly, he says,

¹ William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 6.

² Placher is by no means unique in identifying an epistemological shift—primarily, as we shall see, with regard to univocity—that fatally problematises the relationship between God and the world. Prominently, 'Radical Orthodoxy' traces the problem back even further than Placher to Duns Scotus. See John Milbank and Simon Oliver, 'Radical Orthodoxy', in Rupert Shortt (ed.), *God's Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation* (London: DLT, 2005), 111. However, as Catherine Pickstock has

with the way most pre-modern theologians understood theological language to be a partial expression of God who is ultimately mysterious and beyond them.

In the seventeenth century philosophers and theologians increasingly thought they could talk clearly about God ... Rather than explaining how all categories break down when applied to God, they set the stage for talking about transcendence as one of the definable properties God possesses—a quality we could understand and that many writers today could then come to find deeply unattractive. *In that sense, transcendence gets domesticated, and theology suffered as a result.*³

Placher's argument can be summarised in three stages: firstly, that prior to the seventeenth century, most theologians knew theology to be a partial business, where one is always up against that which is not graspable by human reason nor wholly expressible in human language; secondly, that from the seventeenth century onwards, this notion of God's otherness was effectively reversed by being reduced to something human beings can grasp about God—i.e. God's transcendence—on the basis of universal reason; and thirdly, that contemporary theologians who find transcendence a distasteful concept confuse this domesticated transcendence with what is often labeled 'classical' or 'traditional' theism, and consequently 'classical' or 'traditional' theologies are tarnished with a modernist brush and rejected out of hand. However, suggests Placher, the idea of the transcendence of God as it was conceived pre-seventeenth century, which was much more nuanced than what developed later, need not be rejected according to that which contemporary theologians object to. Let us consider these three stages in a little more detail.

pointed out, even Radical Orthodoxy itself can be seen as an Anglophone highlighting of a theme common in late twentieth century continental thought, of which, for example, Pickstock cites over fifteen examples in one footnote. See Catherine Pickstock, 'Duns Scotus: his historical and contemporary significance', *Modern Theology*, (21, 2005), 569–570, n.2. I therefore recognise that Placher too reflects an Anglo-American—in his case, post-liberal—example of this wider genealogical approach to the problem of transcendence. His argument effectively plays a contextualising role for this thesis because he attends concisely and clearly to the 'modernist' dimension that underpins much of that to which Frei and Bonhoeffer pay attention. What is more, his phrase 'domesticated transcendence' appropriately encapsulates much of that to which Frei and Bonhoeffer object.

³ Placher, *Domestication*, 7.

i) *Pre-modern theological reserve*

Firstly, Placher introduces three pre-modern theologians from across the confessional spectrum—Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–1564)—and argues that each of them encapsulated in their theology what we might call a conceptual reserve. That is, despite their divergences, these three theologians recognised human *incapacity* in theology, understanding that their concepts could not fully express the one about whom they were thinking, writing and speaking.

All three agree that human reason and human efforts cannot make it to God, that thus whatever relation we have with God depends on God’s gracious initiative, to which we must be related in faith that never fully understands.⁴

One can also draw attention to Anselm (1033—1109) whose expression “faith seeking understanding”⁵ is typical of this confessional—or what we might call ‘faith-based’—orientation. In Anselm’s theology, God “gives understanding to faith”,⁶ that God may be understood to exist in such a way that is profitable for the person of faith, whose ‘understanding’ of God is ultimately geared towards a desire for and love of God.⁷ Anselm says to God, “let me seek you in desiring you; let me desire you in seeking you. Let me find you in loving you; let me love you in finding you.”⁸

Reflecting this Anselmian orientation, Placher emphasises that pre-modern Christian theologians aimed, in the context of the life of faith, to further inspire and facilitate thinking about what it means to worship and serve God. As Boyer and Hall explain, “rational exploration [in theology] is certainly possible, and yet is pursued in the light

⁴ In brief, Placher highlights Aquinas’ five ways as statements of reason in the context of faith, and Aquinas’ notion of analogical religious language; Luther’s *theologia crucis* as that which upsets human understanding of divinity, thus making room for faith; and Calvin’s anti-speculative rhetoric designed to direct his audience towards faith. Thus, “in their different ways, all three emphasized how little we can understand about God, and how inadequate our language is for talk about God.” Placher, *Domestication*, 67–68.

⁵ St. Anselm, *Proslogion: with the replies of Gaunilo and Anselm*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 2.

⁶ Anselm, *Proslogion*, 7.

⁷ On God giving knowledge of Godself, Placher comments, “When Jüngel (or Karl Barth) says that in revelation God is the unconditional subject, they mean there is nothing about God we can know whether God wants us to or not.” Placher, *Domestication*, 186.

⁸ Anselm, *Proslogion*, 6.

of a deeper or denser or more complex substantiality than reason is familiar with.”⁹ Putting this in the language of Christian praxis, they say that, ideally, “the reason Christians want to understand the mystery of God is not merely that they may set the metaphysical record straight, but that they may live and worship well”.¹⁰

Furthermore, in each of the three theologians Placher highlights, a confessional context also means an explicitly dynamic Trinitarian dimension. Aquinas, he says, saw that “the relations that matter in knowing and loving God are not to an abstract ‘God’, but to and through the Trinitarian Persons”;¹¹ Luther saw that the elusiveness of the doctrine of the Trinity “served him as a way of pointing to the God of grace known in faith”;¹² while Calvin, for example, conceived of soteriology in Trinitarian terms: “it is only in Christ and through the Spirit that we appropriate knowledge of God or God’s salvific work”.¹³ These openly Trinitarian approaches avoid monistic reductionism—treating God as one object to be examined, in the same way one might examine a rock, or an apple¹⁴—and therefore shy away from the idea that God can be wholly defined.

Overall, Placher can say that God is ‘transcendent’ for Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, not because God has the qualities by which the property of ‘transcendence’ can be reasonably defined, but because God is beyond total definition, by virtue of just being—‘simply’, in Aquinas’ terms—God.¹⁵ Indeed, the idea of defining God’s ‘properties’, as one might define the redness of an apple or the hardness of a rock, performs an illegitimate objectification of the divine—making God into an object beyond which there are general categories in relation to which God can be defined. ‘Transcendence’ therefore, can only really refer to the incapacity of theological

⁹ Steven D. Boyer and Christopher A. Hall, *The Mystery of God: Theology for Knowing the Unknowable* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 11.

¹⁰ Boyer and Hall, *Mystery*, xvii.

¹¹ Placher, *Domestication*, 166.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Placher, *Domestication*, 166–167.

¹⁴ Placher, *Domestication*, 68.

¹⁵ As Aquinas argues, God is divinely simple, not having characteristics or properties in a same way that a particular person shows the properties of the more general category ‘personhood’, but rather being “the same as His essence or nature”. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a.3.3 (trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Second Edition, 1920). Attributes of God, in Aquinas’ understanding, are simply God being God, not general attributes that God accidentally possesses, for God is “in no way composite.” Aquinas, *Summa*, 1a.3.7.

language to contain that which it describes. As Elders puts it in relation to Aquinas, God “is not one particular *thing* standing over and against other beings ... but transcends them in his otherness and divine eminence.”¹⁶ God transcends not because God ‘is transcendent’ *per se*, but simply because God is God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

ii) *The seventeenth century*

The second stage of Placher’s narrative describes how this epistemological humility or conceptual reserve shrunk into the background in the seventeenth century, “to be replaced by claims for more univocal language and tighter arguments.”¹⁷ In particular, Catholic interpreters of Aquinas (especially Cajetan and Suarez)¹⁸ and Protestant interpreters of Luther (especially Quenstedt) began to approach theological language univocally—as if words about God and human beings referred in the same way to the same things. For example, divine wisdom and human wisdom were now understood as degrees of one concept—‘wisdom’—with divine wisdom being a much greater, and human wisdom a lesser, instance of that. Crucially, this posits a general category beyond God, defining God by something more generic and more fundamental—i.e. ‘being’ or ‘reason’. Theologians whose conceptually nuanced theology left space for the otherness or ‘beyondness’ of God were thereby misinterpreted—i.e. read under the presumption of univocity—and for Placher this is the true beginning of the domestication of transcendence. The kind of beyondness that God may possess comes to be understood in terms of space or power—to put it crudely, God being very far away or very much more powerful.¹⁹

¹⁶ Leo Elders, *The Philosophical Theology of St Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990), 169.

¹⁷ Placher, *Domestication*, 71.

¹⁸ Placher briefly contrasts David Burrell’s description of the way analogy functioned formally for Aquinas, with the work of Cardinal Cajetan, who interpreted Aquinas’ approach to religious language through the principle of ‘the analogy of proper proportionality’ (see David Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action* (London: University of Scranton Press, 2008), 63–77; and Ralph McInerny, *The Logic of Analogy: An Interpretation of St Thomas* (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), 3) wherein language about God referred meaningfully because of an analogous ratio between language about, say, humanity’s goodness and God’s goodness. The goodnesses may be unlike, inferred Cajetan, but the way goodness is understood to pertain to both God and humanity is the same. For a critique of this reading of Aquinas and its contemporary influence, see Victor Salas, ‘The Ontology of Analogy in Aquinas’, *The Heythrop Journal* (50, 2009), 635–647.

¹⁹ Placher, *Domestication*, 111.

The issue is not merely a linguistic one, as if the only problem is a misunderstanding concerning language. The linguistic collapse is a problem on account of what it implies metaphysically—not just that God can be spoken of like an object within the world, but to all intents and purposes *is* one. To utilise the metaphor of domestication a little further, God is ‘brought inside’ the universe.

Beginning with problematic interpretations of Aquinas and Luther in particular, this univocity fuels and characterises the rationalist philosophical epistemology that fed into the seventeenth century beginnings of the Enlightenment.²⁰ When René Descartes (1596–1650) developed an epistemology grounded in the self—‘I think therefore I am’—the theological consequence was that thought about God began with thought about ‘I’. Similarly, Placher describes the determination of Leibniz to account for the “simple qualities”²¹ of God, which can be understood by, and used as a basis for, clear reasoning. For Leibniz and Descartes, Placher summarises,

[w]e can recognise the finitude and imperfection of the created world only because we even now have clear and distinct ideas of God’s infinity and perfection, so that we can recognize failures to measure up to them.²²

With the location of truth in universally accessible reason, and the individual thinking subject as locus of the quest for truth, God therefore is thought about as an object that is subject to an individual’s ‘clear and distinct ideas’. In contrast to pre-modern Trinitarianism, Placher also notes how this objectification of God finds its fit in something much more like Deism—God as the monistic distant first cause—rather than in the doctrine of the dynamic loving Trinity who is the Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer of the world. Isaac Newton’s cosmology, for example, bears the hallmarks of this kind of deistic thinking. To Newton (1642 – 1727) “God was first and foremost

²⁰ Noting Livingstone’s warning that ‘modernity’ and ‘enlightenment’ should not be collapsed together or used interchangeably, we can nevertheless observe that the modern emphasis upon “the freedom of individual persons and groups to choose, analyze, test, and question” characterises the epistemological process that characterised the enlightenment, even if ‘modernity’ also refers to “the spirit, feelings, and values of various Romanticisms, with the ideas and sensibility we find in Wordsworth and Coleridge ... in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.” James C. Livingstone, *Modern Christian Thought: The Enlightenment and The Nineteenth Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 3. I will therefore proceed, throughout this thesis, to speak of enlightenment and post-enlightenment epistemology as being ‘modern’, whilst understanding that the ‘modern’ can also refer beyond the enlightenment.

²¹ Placher, *Domestication*, 86.

²² Placher, *Domestication*, 86–87.

the *kosmokrator*, ruler over everything,”²³ and as such, functioned as “a methodological guarantee of the rationality and intelligibility of the world.”²⁴ Theological language thus becomes overtly monistic, focusing upon God as the primary object in the universe.

We must take care not to sideline the historical-political issues at play too, as if all that was occurring was a decontextualised intellectual shift. Rather, in the context of the protests against authorities who appeared to utilise theological frameworks to subject and abuse populations, the enlightenment not only nurtured the view that ideas about God needed to be subjected to reasonable, egalitarian enquiry, but also advocated a general ‘civilised’ religion over against complex doctrines like Trinitarianism that were perceived, to put it crudely, to fuel religious wars. David Hopper describes it like this:

That the population of Germany fell from sixteen million to less than six million over the course of the religiously inspired Thirty Years War (1618 – 1648) has to be reckoned as a major spiritual-intellectual trauma with long-term historical after-effects. Numbers of informed and thoughtful people were led, on the basis of historical experience, to identify religion as a source of earthly suffering and destruction and then, on that basis, to envision a different sort of earthly future.²⁵

However, as Cavanaugh has argued, this narrative itself betrays a crude characterisation of generic ‘religion’ as a cause of war, to which modernist liberal democracy has the solution in the form of the nation state. Cavanaugh does not attempt to excuse religions of their violence, but identifies the “myth of religious violence” as a modern phenomenon that “is itself an ideological accompaniment to shifts in Western configurations of power, especially the transfer of lethal loyalty to the emergent state.”²⁶ Even today, he argues, the myth that all ‘religion’ is violent in comparison to an enlightened secularism underlies a contemporary hostility to *public* religion, and funds a crude dichotomy between theocracy and secularism.²⁷ Quite

²³ Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination: from the middle ages to the seventeenth century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 90.

²⁴ Funkenstein, *Theology*, 193.

²⁵ David Hopper, *Divine Transcendence and the Culture of Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 46–47.

²⁶ William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 11.

²⁷ Cavanaugh, *The Myth*, 14.

simply, we might say, the myth of religious violence *requires* the domestication of God, inside the boundaries of the nation state.

In this case, then, blame for the domestication of transcendence may well be laid at the feet of abusers of power and stokers of violent discord—‘religious’ and ‘secular’—as much as the intellectual revolutionaries. Whatever the case though, Placher’s point remains: something crucial about what it means to think theologically (something that did *not* overtly propagate violence and discord) was lost in the seventeenth century, and this loss would affect theological thinking for hundreds of years to come.

iii) Contemporary distaste for transcendence

The third stage of Placher’s argument moves to the present day, drawing attention to what Cumin calls a “distaste for divine transcendence”,²⁸ whereby contemporary theologians protest against the idea of God’s transcendence because they understand this to fuel the idea of an overbearing divine Other—virtually synonymous with the image of a dominant human ruler—“defined in terms of absolute power and ultimately inconsistent with Christian affirmations about God’s love and tender care.”²⁹ Such theological objections to transcendence go hand in hand with an emphasis upon *immanence* as a more meaningful way of speaking about God. A picture of God’s closeness to human beings and love for them is contrasted with the severity of ‘traditional’ transcendence.

The critique of the view of transcendence conceived of in terms of power rings true, for example, in relation to Newton (see above), who thought of God’s power in terms of God’s *potentia absoluta*—an absolute power “taken *in abstracto* and without reference to the orders of nature and grace he has actually willed ... to establish.”³⁰ This God,

²⁸ Paul Cumin, *Christ at the Cruc: The Mediation of God and Creation in Christological Perspective* (Oregon: Pickwick, 2014), ix.

²⁹ Placher, *Domestication*, 8.

³⁰ Francis Oakley, “The Absolute and Ordained Power of God and King in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: Philosophy, Science, Politics, and Law”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* (59, 1998), 669-690. Sourced from https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_the_history_of_ideas/v059/59.4oakley.html.

says Soskice, is “a master and ruler of the world that he inhabits as supreme being.”³¹ Such notions of pure absolute power mastering the universe connect to “the violence concomitant in totalizing metanarratives... large-scale stories about an all powerful protagonist with the world and its inhabitants as only passive props”,³² thereby rendering transcendence ultimately objectionable.

However, although this assessment is on target when it comes to Newtonian metaphysics, Placher wants to emphasise that it is not an appropriate criticism of the pre-modern theologians. The notion of overbearing divine transcendence is much more applicable to the *domesticated* transcendence of the seventeenth century than it is to pre-modern theology. Rejecting the idea of God as a divine dictator is quite proper, but theologians are,

wrong to blame ‘the Christian tradition’ or ‘classical Christian theism’ for the faults they identify. The principle object of their complaint came to dominate the Christian understanding of divine transcendence only in the seventeenth century.³³

Ironically then, this ‘principle object of complaint’—the monistic, overbearing, patriarchal ‘object’ at the pinnacle of the world—represents both the impact of the enlightenment on theological thinking, and also the kind of authoritarianism from which enlightenment thinkers sought emancipation. The Enlightenment narrative of individual emancipation through universal reason claimed to offer freedom from the

³¹ Janet Martin Soskice, ‘Naming God: A Study in Faith and Reason’, in Paul J. Griffiths and Reinhardt Hütter (eds.), *Reason and the Reasons of Faith* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 253.

³² Cumin, *Christ*, ix–x.

³³ Placher, *Domestication*, 215. Rainer Mayer manifests this misdirected critique of ‘classical theism’, saying “the traditional concept of god’s transcendence has been influenced by Aristotelian and Thomistic metaphysics of being and by the mythology of classical antiquity. The *metaphysics* of being depicts a God as the Supreme Being; his qualities are the values and qualities of mankind projected into the infinite.” Rainer Mayer, ‘Christology: The Genuine Form of Transcendence’, in A. J. Klassen, *A Bonhoeffer Legacy: Essays in Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 180. See also Jürgen Moltmann, who, for example, expresses opposition to what he believes is the monistic approach of a classical theologian like Aquinas, confirming Placher’s thesis that ‘classical theism’ is being scapegoated for being the origin of what is in fact an enlightenment theology. For example, in his Trinitarian theology, Moltmann allows for only two possible readings of Aquinas’ five ways: either a modernist approach exemplified by Vatican I (1871), or according to what he calls a “Greek concept of a cosmos which is hierarchical in order, graduated into different strata of being” Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, trans. Kohl (London: SCM, 1981), 10–11. Neither reading allows for the conceptual openness that Placher observes in Aquinas.

God who limits and dictates; yet this view of God is precisely the result of the subjection of theological thinking to modern epistemology itself.³⁴ When God's transcendence is thought through within the confines of what human beings know about power and ruling, with the individual at the centre, it is no wonder the result is objectionable. Without an epistemological approach that allows God to be ultimately *indefinable*, transcendence can imply for many that God is a human dictator writ large.

Therefore, although the Enlightenment was narrated as emancipatory—and indeed the drive for emancipation from monarchic and ecclesiastical authoritarianism was real and meaningful enough—the intellectual model that drove the enlightenment meant that “the beneficiaries of the Enlightenment ... wanted to know in order to control.”³⁵ Divine transcendence, falsely construed as oppressive, gives way to human control, falsely construed as liberating. As Williams explains, the Enlightenment therefore sets up a false choice “between coercive universal rationalism and pre-critical authority”.³⁶ (Universal rationalism is coercive because “when decision makers have determined what is rational, they are bound sooner or later to regard opposition as irrational and so without legitimacy. They will embark on a coercive political pedagogy, to make citizens rational.”)³⁷ If this is the choice we think we have, Williams suggests, “it may well be time to ask if the argument has been properly set out in the first place.”³⁸ As Gunton puts it, “[t]he modern servitude of the immanent is a mark of our alienation from what which makes us what we are. [It] ... depends upon the mistake of failing to recognize the fact that freedom requires otherness.”³⁹

Conceptually open and doxologically orientated theology allows talk of God's transcendence to refer to a beyondness and mystery that allows us real freedom in

³⁴ “The modern world is wrong in so far as it conceives of otherness as necessarily heteronomous, believing that a God standing against us in judgement and grace is an offence to independence and freedom ... that is precisely *modernity's* error ... because it generates by reflex, by the workings of its own inner logic, a repetition of that which it sought to escape.” Colin Gunton, *The One The Three and The Many: God, Creation and The Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), 37.

³⁵ Colin J. D. Greene, *Christology in Cultural Perspective: Marking Out the Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 74.

³⁶ Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 123.

³⁷ Williams, *Faith*, 113.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Gunton, *The One*, 37.

relation to God who is wholly other, because it points to the freedom of God from our control or grasp, and therefore the utter freedom and gratuity of God's love for the world. In Kathryn Tanner's terms, affirming of the "radical" otherness of God from creation allows for a proper concept of "non-competitive relation between creatures and God", such that God's transcendence means anything but the limiting of human freedom by an overbearing Other.⁴⁰

God, from beyond this plane of created reality, brings about the *whole* plane of creaturely being and activity in its goodness. The creature's receiving from God does not then require its passivity in the world: God's activity as the giver of ourselves need not come at the expense of our own activity. Instead, the creature receives from God its very activity as a good.⁴¹

The travesty of the domestication of transcendence is that it threatens to mute this message of the world's given-ness by God, construing God's transcendence as that which threatens our freedom, rather than that which makes for our lives as creatures—i.e. the freedom of the loving Creator.⁴²

Some post-modern theologians also display this 'distaste' for what is wrongly perceived as classical theism's approach to transcendence. For example, introducing a volume of postmodern essays on transcendence, Caputo and Scanlon register an acceptance among contributors to the volume that the classical idea of transcendence either needs to be replaced by an "ultra-transcendence",⁴³ or refigured in a "secular theology [which] allows God to quit God's traditional transcendence and to empty Godself without remainder into the world, into the Spirit of love and the affirmation of the body".⁴⁴ They judge transcendence as traditionally conceived as "a classically

⁴⁰ Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2001), 2.

⁴¹ Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity*, 4.

⁴² See also David Kelsey's comments emphasis upon "God's hospitable generosity, creatively relating to us, free of creatures in creating and attentively delighting in them in their otherness to God, self-committed to that which is created". Kelsey follows Tanner's thrust towards non-competition, contrasting this with the traditionally conceived opposition between transcendence and immanence (terms laden with a sense of either God's "opposition" to, or "identity" with the world). David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology, vol 1*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 175.

⁴³ John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, 'Introduction' in Caputo and Scanlon (eds.), *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Enquiry* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2007), 3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

patriarchal model, representing a top-down, hierarchical, even imperial way to conceive the relationship of the divine to the human, and which has served, by unhappy extension, as a model of the relation of the masculine to the feminine and of the human to the nonhuman.”⁴⁵ Again, rejection of these things is credible, but the post-modern solutions are themselves all too often little more than examples of domesticated transcendence.

David Wood, for example, offers a refigured ‘secular’ transcendence, criticising traditionally spatial or topological language concerning the transcendent. In particular he views traditional approaches as ethically and politically problematic, fuelling binaries such as “inside/outside, self/other, us/them, friend/enemy – and hence immanent and transcendent”.⁴⁶ He reconceives transcendence as the immanent experience of limit, wherein the meaningfulness of transcendence is in the response that such experience of limit provokes. He rejects the idea that human beings encounter limit by ‘God turning up’,⁴⁷ preferring instead to speak of an experience whereby “one can come to see oneself as addressed by the experience in which [the good, love, freedom] becomes apparent.”⁴⁸

James P. Mackey rejects the idea of God beyond or outside space-time and of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing) believing they imply divine overbearingness and distant authoritarianism.⁴⁹ Instead, he describes a universe wherein transcendence is the activity of continual forming and shaping from within—a bringing about “new forms of things or of processes in which they engage and from which they result.”⁵⁰ Thus people can,

detect within all this pullulating and pulsating universe a unified and unifying power ... [and] may well claim that they are in the presence of the traces of a being which, as the constant creative source of cosmic or universal reality, can be deemed divine.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Caputo and Scanlon, ‘Introduction’, 4.

⁴⁶ David Wood, ‘Topologies of Transcendence’, in Caputo and Scanlon, *Transcendence*, 71.

⁴⁷ Wood, ‘Topologies’, 181.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ James P. Mackey, ‘Transcendent Immanence and Evolutionary Creation’, in Caputo and Scanlon, *Transcendence*, 95.

⁵⁰ Mackey, ‘Transcendent’, 94.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

He calls this a “pragmatist model of revelation and knowledge ... [that] yields a model of morality as cooperative envisaging-of and attempting better being, more fulfilled life and existence for all inevitably interlinked creative creatures,”⁵² implying that this is a welcome alternative to traditional views that engender an unsavoury morality of ‘power-over’ rather than ‘operation-within’.⁵³

Jean Luc Marion offers an example of ‘ultra-transcendence’, criticising traditional terms like omnipotence and omniscience because they define God according to possibility. In other words, saying ‘God can do anything that is possible’ limits God according to the conception of possibility. Marion swiftly criticises Aquinas for defining God’s possibility (or what is possible for God) within the boundaries of non-contradiction.⁵⁴ Marion suggests that true ‘incapacity’ in relation to thinking about God takes the form of a “triple impossibility—impossibility with regard to intuition; impossibility with regard to concept; and impossibility, therefore, with regard to experiencing the slightest phenomenon.”⁵⁵ Despite this total lack, though, the question of God is both possible to ask and *is* asked by human beings; and is therefore a question about the possibility of the *impossible*. God “*lets himself be defined by impossibility as such*”,⁵⁶ insofar as God is the One for whom “there is no possibility of impossibility.”⁵⁷ Marion therefore speaks of “radical possibility”, whereby God originates, or *gives*, possibility out of impossibility.⁵⁸ Aware that saying ‘God makes the impossible possible’ could produce limitless nonsense, Marion concludes that the boundary to this kind of thinking is God’s *will*—not what God ‘can’ do, but what God wants to do. God’s desire is the truly impossible for humanity—the forgiveness of sins, and the reconciliation of humanity with God.⁵⁹ Conceiving God as the one who is impossible for humanity and who does the radically impossible, expresses, for Marion,

⁵² Mackey, ‘Transcendent’, 95.

⁵³ See also Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (London: SCM, 1966), 76–77.

⁵⁴ Jean Luc Marion, ‘The Impossible for Man—God’, in Caputo and Scanlon, *Transcendence*, 30.

⁵⁵ Marion, ‘The Impossible’, 24.

⁵⁶ Marion, ‘The Impossible’, 25.

⁵⁷ Marion, ‘The Impossible’, 27–28.

⁵⁸ Marion, ‘The Impossible’, 31. E.g. the Annunciation—where, for Marion, God’s word announces not that which can be conceived of as possible, but a contradictory impossibility—i.e. virgin pregnancy.

⁵⁹ Matthew 9:1–8.

a “radical and non-metaphysical transcendence”⁶⁰ reconceived along the lines of God who is love: “God’s transcendence manifests itself in charity, and only thus does transcendence reveal itself to be worthy of God.”⁶¹

There seems no reason not to accept the substance of Marion’s proposal that we should conceive God’s transcendence along the lines of divine love beyond the possibilities of humanity. Nevertheless, Placher’s thesis calls into question the implication that this necessarily dispenses with a ‘classical’ notion of transcendence. Marion is asking for ‘possibility’ to be thought of according to epistemological and metaphysical ‘incapacity’ in human thinking; but according to Placher that is exactly what Aquinas (whom Marion critiques) is saying too. If ‘non-contradiction’ implied not the containing of divinity within reason, but rather the inner consistency of God according to God’s nature, we could accept Marion’s proposal without fundamentally opposing ‘classical’ thinking.⁶²

Therefore, despite ostensibly rejecting the reduction of everything to a grand narrative, and the insistence upon the importance of a ‘turn to the other’ for ethics and theology,⁶³ postmodernity displays very similar characteristics to modernity as regards the discussion of transcendence. Individualism is, paradoxically, the grand narrative to which all is reduced. What Greene calls the pluralistic “consumer metanarrative of endless satisfaction or peak experiences”⁶⁴ shatters the universal human subject into millions of pieces, each with their own narrative of fulfillment,

⁶⁰ Marion, ‘The Impossible’, 38.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Marion’s treatment of Aquinas is the subject of discussions elsewhere, especially as regards a critique of Aquinas (in Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991)) that Marion later recants. See, e.g. Wayne J. Hankey, ‘*Theoria versus Poesis*: Neoplatonism and Trinitarian Difference in Aquinas, John Milbank, Jean Luc Marion and John Zizioulas’, *Modern Theology* (15, 1999), 389. Marion’s article on transcendence referred to above, however, occurs long after these discussions, presenting its own issues. This places the article in curious relation to Marion’s overall thinking about Aquinas, but for the purposes of this chapter, the point above functions adequately in isolation from the wider discussion, which can be pursued elsewhere.

⁶³ See David Tracy, ‘Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity’, *Theology Today* (51, 1994), 111.

⁶⁴ Greene, *Christology*, 383. Gerard Loughlin offers a similar diagnosis, that secular postmodernity is really only “paganized modernity” announcing human emancipation in the “spaces of the shopping mall, or in the mazes and caverns of textualism”. Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God’s story: Bible, Church and narrative theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 25. He does, however, suggest that properly conceived Christian theology is “postmodern” in a true sense, insofar as it is not “founded upon anything other than the performance of its story.” Loughlin, *Telling*, 21.

ironically grounded in the belief that buying mass produced items somehow secures that individuality. In this intellectual environment, transcendence is again something definable, a ‘quality’ to be analysed, with God thereby ‘put in place’.

The [postmodern] metanarrative is constructed upon two residual premises of modernity, one that individual freedom is the ultimate value of worth, two that in order to encourage the former, religion should continue to be marginalised and privatized. In the process, transcendence becomes a totally this-worldly experience encouraged and promoted by the post-modern philosophies of libidinal flow and extension, where the human being is no more than an avatar of desire and ecstasy.⁶⁵

Overall, the postmodern redefinitions of transcendence espoused by Caputo and others, say Gregor and Zimmerman, end up ‘closing the door’ on (i.e. domesticating) “the biblical God whose address occurred incarnationally and thus ontologically, and whose self-revelation invites a relational participation.”⁶⁶ Placher therefore wants us to realise that we need not choose simply between an objectionable ‘classical’ model on one hand, and the rejection of transcendence altogether on the other, for to do so is to accept the options falsely set out according to the enlightenment’s domesticating terms.

Overall, following the approach epitomised by pre-modern thinkers, Placher therefore wants to think of transcendence as describing total otherness yet also relationality, rather than a distant and/or over-bearing patriarch, and of course, these aspects come into focus much more sharply as we begin to speak explicitly about Christology. Christology, says Placher, does not “dodge”⁶⁷ the question of transcendence, but in fact locates it in a far more particularised, and—to use the Pauline terminology taken up by Luther and subsequently Bonhoeffer—offensive form. At this stage we move beyond the contents of Placher’s argument in *The Domestication of Transcendence*, towards the more specific question about Jesus’ transcendence on which Frei and Bonhoeffer will be put to use.

⁶⁵ Greene, *Christology*, 383.

⁶⁶ Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmerman, ‘Introduction’, in Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmerman (eds.), *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought: Cruciform Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 13.

⁶⁷ Placher, *Domestication*, 193.

II

Domesticated Transcendence and Christology

i) Why think about Jesus' transcendence?

Discussing Jesus' transcendence is more complicated than just replacing 'God' in the narrative above with 'Jesus'. In the case of the incarnation of God in the man Jesus of Nazareth, talk of other-ness has also to deal with the like-ness on which, for example, a central argument of the book of Hebrews hinges.⁶⁸ Christians proclaim that Jesus Christ, who "dwelt among us",⁶⁹ "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius",⁷⁰ is Jesus Christ who is "seated at [God's] right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name".⁷¹ The likeness to which Hebrews 2:11 refers is introduced against the explicit backdrop of Jesus Christ's identity as "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, [who] sustains everything by his powerful word."⁷² Historical dwelling-amongst and heavenly exaltation-above therefore relate to the same subject—Jesus of Nazareth. Christological talk of the 'mysterious' and 'wholly other'—even if conceived in what Placher would call more pre-modern terms—becomes more complex, because Christology simultaneously describes a becoming like us at the heart of what it means to speak of God's activity in Christ.⁷³ One cannot avoid the historical, and although the historical is something we generally think of as immediate to us rather than other than us, one cannot emphasise transcendence at the expense of Jesus' historical likeness to us.

It is not the case, however, that Jesus mitigates a general divine transcendence by being 'immanent'; neither is it the case that God was distant and removed from the

⁶⁸ E.g. Hebrews 2:17.

⁶⁹ John 1:14.

⁷⁰ Luke 3:1.

⁷¹ Ephesians 1:20.

⁷² Hebrews 1:3.

⁷³ E.g. "one basic and persuasive conviction about the conditions for salvation was then that, to have healed and saved us/me, Jesus must be truly and fully human. This conclusion, current from the time of Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen in the second and third centuries, received its classical formulation from Gregory of Nazianzus in the fourth century: 'the unassumed is the unhealed' (*Epistola*, 101.32)." Gerald O'Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 160.

world and then came close, nor that ‘immanence’ is somehow a more correct conception of God, over and against the idea that God is transcendent. Downplaying transcendence in the question of Jesus’ identity effectively denies any meaningfulness to saying that the divine *Logos* became flesh,⁷⁴ and such a denial eradicates any real continuity between the second person of the Trinity and Jesus of Nazareth. If otherness is key to how we speak about God, then sidelining otherness when speaking about Jesus Christ calls into question whether we are thinking about incarnation at all. Language about Jesus’ transcendence therefore involves considering the particularly historical in union with the divine—not in an abstract sense, but in relation to the particular narrative of Jesus of Nazareth. For someone historical to be called transcendent certainly complicates matters, but the reasons for pursuing this line of thought are unavoidable.

If one agrees with Placher that transcendence can and should be conceived in such a way that yields a conceptual openness to theology whilst enabling the praxis of worship, then the question of Jesus’ transcendence becomes about more than holding together distance/otherness and closeness/likeness, but about how, in the midst of such a holding-together, we can also develop openness and humility in relationship to Jesus. Jesus is specific and particular, but is beyond us and cannot be grasped by us—and recognising this yields a conceptual humility. Placher’s thesis thus starts us off on the right foot for thinking about Christology—and his critique of modern thinking about God can be supplemented with comments about the effect of modernity on Christology in particular. Quite simply, thinking about Jesus’ transcendence is unavoidable, and promises to be fruitful.

ii) *Christology and the domestication of transcendence*

Colin Greene explicitly draws attention to the gulf between, on one hand, the orthodox Christology of God’s union with humanity through the incarnation, and on the other, the Deistic, monistic theology of the Enlightenment, which essentially conceived of Jesus as an exemplary human being. For a typical Enlightenment thinker like David Hume (1711–1776) Chalcedonian ‘two natures Christology’ is just

⁷⁴ John 1:14.

“another illegitimate violation of the limits of human reason”.⁷⁵ This means that very little remains except “a preference for a Jesus who was basically a moral educator.”⁷⁶ Christology therefore merely extends a monistic doctrine of God; it “degenerated into a Jesuology that was exemplarist, rationalistic, anti-supernatural and thoroughly moralistic.”⁷⁷

This Christological reductionism arguably reaches a peak in the nineteenth century with the ‘quests’ for the historical Jesus, and the assumption that the way to get to the heart of the identity of Jesus was to deploy as fully as possible the tools of historical criticism, distinguishing in the process the idea of ‘Jesus as he truly was’ from what was/is known as the ‘Christ of faith’.⁷⁸ Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) wrote in 1906 that Christology “had first to be shattered before men could once more go out in quest of the historical Jesus ... That the historic Jesus is something different from the Jesus Christ of the doctrine of the two Natures seems to us now self-evident.”⁷⁹ The narrative of emancipation from ecclesial authority and dogma is clearly evidenced in this aspect of the historical Jesus movement: if Jesus was meaningful for Western religious life, then his meaningfulness must be discerned critically, without recourse to the dogmatic pronouncements of ecclesial authority, but rather by virtue of critical reason and historical investigation—subjecting the narratives about him to scientific rationalism so as to determine their factuality. The quest aimed to “bring [Jesus] straight into our time as a Teacher and Saviour”⁸⁰ and in doing so, loose “the bands by which he had been riveted for centuries to the stony rocks of ecclesiastical doctrine.”⁸¹

However, the project to make Jesus ‘contemporary’ meant, of course, making him *accessible* to reason, and therefore the perceived ‘bringing’ of Jesus into contemporary life so that the figure witnessed to in the New Testament might be meaningfully

⁷⁵ Greene, *Christology*, 83.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Greene, *Christology*, 96-97.

⁷⁸ The title of Philip Pullman’s 2010 novel, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (Edinburgh: Cannongate, 2010) indicates just how potent this dichotomy remains today.

⁷⁹ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, Third edition (London: SCM, 1954), 4.

⁸⁰ Schweitzer, *Quest*, 397.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

encountered achieved anything but that—for in fact it re-molded Jesus to fit inside the prevailing epistemological framework. The coming of God the Son into history, as history's *telos*, was turned back on itself, for historical criticism defined Jesus to the extent that language about his divinity was virtually meaningless except as a reference to exemplary teaching and spirituality, resulting from his paradigmatic connection to a monistic deity. In the hands of the quests, Jesus is rid of any aspect of transcendence, of being beyond human epistemology. In Stephen Sykes' words, this Christology fails by losing the real difference of Jesus, for "[a]ny account which does not distinguish him from the rest of humanity is not credible as Christology".⁸² Like Descartes' God, this Jesus is little more than an object for analysis. Christology conducted under the tents of modernity, therefore,

replicates ... the futile search for absolute foundations, as demonstrated in the endless search for the elusive historical Jesus, and renders the discourse of salvation nothing more than a carbon copy of the rhetoric of socio-political emancipation. Hence, inadvertently and almost imperceptible, Christianity capitulates to the cultural aspirations and mores of modernity.⁸³

In historical Jesus scholarship, Christology becomes a mere screen onto which human beings project their own account of their salvation, improvement, or emancipation. It is the religious equivalent of trying to pull oneself up by one's own bootstraps—a secular Pelagianism, as it were. The transcendence, or the absolute *difference* of Jesus, is absent in this kind of thinking.

These issues continue into the twentieth century. For example, John Macquarrie (1919–2007) reduces Christology to exemplarist anthropology by arguing for a modern redefinition of the terms of incarnation from the question of how God becomes man, to the question, “‘how does a man become God?’ or ‘How does a human life embody or manifest divine life?’”⁸⁴ Macquarrie seeks to counterbalance

⁸² Stephen Sykes, ‘The Theology of the Humanity of Christ’, in S. W. Sykes and J. P. Clayton (eds.), *Christ, Faith and History: Cambridge Studies in Christology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1972), 66.

⁸³ See Greene, *Christology*, 276.

⁸⁴ John Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (London: SCM, 1990), 360. Macquarrie also prefers a narrative whereby the difference between Jesus Christ and the Old Testament prophets (in terms of embodying the revelation of God) is one of degree rather than kind; i.e. Jesus is a fuller (perhaps the fullest) embodiment of the human capacity to bear the divine. Macquarrie does not think that human beings can do this without divine activity towards them (see also John Macquarrie, *In Search of Deity: An*

transcendence with the incarnation, which is conceived as immanence. Incarnation, he seems to think, is about transcendence being overcome. This makes holding on to language about the transcendence of Jesus highly problematic, because if the incarnation overcomes God's transcendence, then we are liable to think of transcendence as something which Jesus somehow compensates for, and therefore does not exhibit in relation to us.

So far, having considered how Placher's thesis translates into Christology, we have focussed upon the impact of modernist thinking on the question of Jesus' transcendence; but it is also important to recognise that whilst the enlightenment does indeed illuminate that question in a particularly revealing light (and that this is the light in which Frei and Bonhoeffer approach to question) the tendency for socio-political 'domestication' of Jesus is by no means limited to that period. The questions and problems surrounding the articulation of Jesus' transcendence are not solely a result of the Enlightenment, but concern, as I have written above, the very tensions to which the New Testament introduces us.

For example, the tendency to shape Jesus for political or socio-economic purposes was evident in early political Christology too. Greene describes how the conception of the Emperor as the representative of Christ's authority on earth was itself inextricably (albeit problematically) linked to the patristic cosmic or *logos* Christology. The Emperor was perceived "as a copy or image of the divine *logos* who rules in the heavenly spheres ... God the Father, King of the universe, has conferred authority on Jesus the representative of his kingship on earth, [and] that authority has now been transferred to Jesus' vice-regent the emperor."⁸⁵ The result is a politically expedient imperial Christology, that fails to take account of the challenging shape of Jesus' historical life, and also fails to adequately recognise God's transcendence. The line which joins God-in-Christ's authority and human authority is implied to be one of absolute likeness—or in the terms we began with, of univocity.⁸⁶ The kind of power God has can be conferred as-is on the Emperor.

Essay In Dialectical Theism (London: SCM, 1984), 233) but nevertheless the implication remains that the transcendence of God and the existence of Jesus Christ are separate—the one being quite the opposite of the other.

⁸⁵ Greene, *Christology*, 48.

⁸⁶ Again, see e.g., Ephesians 1:20-21.

Greene contends that the reason for this collapse of Christ and Emperor is the concentration upon “the divine exalted Christ to the virtual exclusion of the historical Jesus”,⁸⁷ an exclusion which leads to the failure to recognise the inconsistency of eliding the life of Jesus of Nazareth with imperial power. (Consider the exclusion, for example, of Jesus’ own socio-political critique of power, and his solidarity with the poor.) Alongside this, however, is also the failure to think through what it means to say Christ *transcends* as both divine and human, or to attend to the fact that human beings cannot bear his transcendent authority. The problem Greene highlights is not irrevocably solved by emphasising that Jesus lived a radically sacrificial life (as vital as that is).⁸⁸ Merely writing a historical, political Jesus into the heavens does not exhaust the question, for it still leaves the door open for univocity as regards the relationship between Jesus Christ and other human persons. Whilst metaphors such as the church as the ‘body of Christ’ and ‘meeting Christ in the other’ can reflect the depth of a Christian’s and a Christian community’s contemporaneous identification with Jesus Christ, we are always required to take seriously the true ‘otherness’ of God-in-Christ as the one beyond us. Without transcendence (that is, otherness/beyond-ness) in Christology, the proclamation of Christ’s universal significance struggles for meaning, except along the lines of imposing one human narrative over all others—whether this is the ironic error of the Enlightenment as described above, an imperial Emperor cult with a Christological gloss, or some other socio-political manifesto.

Overall therefore, the problematic tendency to domesticate Jesus inside our own epistemological frameworks or socio-political structures/ideologies—especially as exemplified in the enlightenment and post-enlightenment periods—needs to be countered by addressing the question of his transcendence *in* his historical particularity.

⁸⁷ Greene, *Christology*, 61.

⁸⁸ Greene, *Christology*, 49.

iii) *Christological transcendence and historicity*

In *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God* (1975) Ray S. Anderson insists that the question of Christological transcendence should not be viewed as one branch of the general ‘transcendence issue’, but is in fact the place where the question of God’s transcendence is most fully asked. To ask after Jesus’ transcendence, Anderson implies, is to attend to the point at which God’s transcendence is both axiomatically and climactically encountered in history—i.e. the incarnation of the divine *Logos* in the person Jesus of Nazareth.⁸⁹ Rejecting the perception that transcendence pertains to distance rather than otherness, Anderson argues that true otherness—fundamentally the otherness of God—is encountered bodily and historically, and therefore the question of transcendence is asked in relation to God’s activity towards the world in history, not in relation to what which is beyond history.

Speaking of personal relations, Anderson suggests that the only way I encounter the true other-ness of another person is by their spirit encountering me in the concreteness of historical bodily existence. By ‘spirit’ Anderson describes that aspect of the other person—one might call it their ‘person-ness’—that I cannot get to the bottom of; the “limit” that constitutes “the hiddenness of the other as self.”⁹⁰ This limit is what must be “crossed” for there to be true encounter between myself and the other person, and that crossing happens when I am up against the other person in their concrete, bodily historicity.⁹¹ Their difference to me—i.e. their transcendence—is encountered in the concrete. It is therefore wrong to understand the material, the bodily (or what one might summarise as the ‘immanent’) as that which needs to be transcended, for concrete historical existence is precisely the way that the true otherness of another—that which is wholly not ourselves, and which we cannot grasp—is really met.

Concreteness as we think of it in terms of personal existence is not a limit, but is the act of transcendence itself. That is, it is spirit concretizing itself as action.

⁸⁹ Ray S. Anderson, *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God: A Christological Critique* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), 18.

⁹⁰ Anderson, *Historical*, 18. I am grateful to Rowan Williams for discussions around Anderson’s terminology of spirit and limit.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

So that, when we are ‘up against’ the concreteness of the other, we are not up against a symbol, or a barrier which must be ‘transcended’, but we are up against spirit itself.⁹²

Accepting that the transcendent aspects of personal relations secondarily reflect the primary transcendence of God, Anderson suggests that God’s wholly-other-ness is encountered in what can be called God’s “act of concretizing himself as Spirit with and in human existence”.⁹³ Divine transcendence is the act by which God who is Spirit makes Godself encounter-able as wholly other in history. In summary, transcendence for Anderson is the divine act whereby the One wholly other than the world is towards the world in history. “[T]he transcendence of God is God’s *placing* of himself into concrete, historical relation to man as the limiting reality of man’s authentic existence.”⁹⁴

⁹² Anderson, *Historical*, 20. Readers of Bonhoeffer will already recognise echoes of *Sanctorum Communio* here. Portions of Anderson’s book are dedicated to exploring Bonhoeffer as a theologian of ‘historical transcendence’, and his work in this vein will be drawn upon later on, both critically and in support of my own thesis.

⁹³ Anderson, *Historical*, 123. Anderson can be difficult to pin down on his precise meaning of S/spirit. By continually emphasising the utter difference of God and world, he distances himself from Hegel’s notion of the Absolute Spirit that realises itself in history. Note, for example, Beiser’s summary of Hegel’s notion of divinity, which it would be impossible for Anderson to agree with: “[I]t is only through human activity and self-awareness that the divine fully realises itself. If there were no human self-awareness and activity, the divine would still exist, to be sure, yet it would remain, imperfect, potential, inchoate and indeterminate.” Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 74. Of course, Anderson would agree that we cannot understand God without God’s interaction with and relation to human beings, but Hegel’s position as Beiser describes it wholly limits divine freedom/otherness in relation to human beings. For Anderson, God as Spirit is the ultimately un-like. As ‘spirit’, every other person is not me, but does exhibit other likenesses to me, most fundamentally in being a creature. God, however, is supremely other from the world, and as ‘Spirit’, God is not a universal for Anderson. Nevertheless, if, as Beiser says, Spirit for Hegel also involved something of “the self-consciousness of life”,⁹³ then there is an affinity between them. Beiser, *Hegel*, 110. Anderson has written elsewhere that ‘spirit’ is “the experience of the self as ensouled body and embodied soul in relation to God” (Ray S. Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology*, (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1991) 38.); and that “Spirit ... might be considered the life of the soul (the person) as an orientation toward God, summoned forth by the divine Word and enabled by the divine Spirit.” Anderson, *On Being*, 212. Spirit is primarily identified with soul rather than body because “there is a precedence which the soul exercises with respect to the body [and therefore] the soul becomes the primary orientation of the spirit in this act of life.” *Ibid.* As Williams describes it, “‘Spirit’ for Anderson, is fundamentally action, free personal action”. Rowan D. Williams, ‘Review of *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God* by Ray S. Anderson’, *The Downside Review* (94, 1976), 237. Overall then, in a manner akin to Hegel, Anderson understands Spirit as that which concretises itself. Yet unlike Hegel, Anderson’s emphasis is upon radical difference rather than on a universal absolute spirit.

⁹⁴ Anderson, *Historical*, 151.

The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is the pinnacle of this divine act of transcendence towards the world.⁹⁵ It is not just a way of thinking, nor a “timeless event which ... serves as a regulative principle”,⁹⁶ but is the “axiomatic penetration of God’s transcendence in the world”.⁹⁷ In the particular historical existence of Jesus Christ, human beings come up against the wholly otherness of God that cannot be relativised/domesticated into their own frameworks.

Anderson thus implies that the question of the transcendence of Jesus is not an ‘optional extra’ to the question of divine transcendence *per se*, but simply *is* that question, enquiring as it does into the person in whom God’s transcendence is fully expressed and encountered. Anderson’s work therefore presses upon us the centrality of Jesus’ historical particularity for any attempt to respond to the domestication of transcendence, because the response to domestication is not to push away from history but towards it. Whilst, to my mind, the relationship between transcendence as *otherness* and transcendence as *the act by which otherness is concretised* requires further clarification in this work, Anderson illuminates compellingly the important connection between transcendence and historical particularity in Christology, which is precisely that element common to both Frei and Bonhoeffer that I will suggest is an effective locus for the question of a middle way between closed and wide-open theology.

The following chapter will examine the particular way in which Hans Frei is a critic of what Placher calls the domestication of God’s transcendence, and will examine the Christological consequences of Frei’s response to this—in particular the implications that arise for his emphasis upon the historical particularity of Jesus as witnessed to in the gospel narratives. Before embarking on this move, I note that both Frei and Bonhoeffer share an appreciative yet critical engagement with Karl Barth, whose

⁹⁵ Anderson recognises that God’s act towards Israel prior to the incarnation exhibits the logic of historical transcendence, especially insofar as the concrete and particular acts of God towards Israel (e.g. Moses before the burning bush, or on Mt. Sinai) are the way Israel is called to know and respond to the universal God. The logic of Israel’s knowledge of and response to God is always from the particular to the universal, never vice versa. “[W]hen God speaks and acts he is *there* in the anthropomorphic event ... this is not reversible ... an anthropomorphic event does not *of itself* mean that God is there.” Anderson, *Historical*, 117. In the climax of the incarnation, God the Son, as human being, enacts wholly and perfectly the covenant response to God which humanity (specifically Israel) is called to make.

⁹⁶ Anderson, *Historical*, 107.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

theology is a crucial for the way both theologians develop their particular approaches to transcendence and Christology. From the perspective of Frei and Bonhoeffer, Barth's own response to the domestication of transcendence, especially following the publication of the second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans*, shines an important light on the perceived errors of modernism in the form of a theology of revelation, whilst nevertheless—again from the perspective of both—failing to offer a proper elucidation of the historicity of Jesus Christ in relation to God's transcendence. The following chapter therefore begins with Frei's early response to Barth in relation to the problem of transcendence in revelation, before exploring Frei's work concerning the modernist shift in the approach to biblical narrative, and his corresponding call for greater emphasis on the particular identity of Jesus Christ as rendered historically in the gospels.

Chapter 3.

HANS FREI: TRANSCENDENCE, HERMENEUTICS AND CHRISTOLOGY

Hans Frei was born in Breslau in 1922, to a secular Jewish family, but baptised Lutheran. With the rise of the Nazis Frei was sent to a Quaker school in England before his family emigrated to the U.S. in 1938. Needing a college place, Frei initially studied textiles in North Carolina (graduating in 1942) but on the advice of H. Richard Niebuhr, with whom he had been corresponding previously, enrolled to study theology at Yale Divinity School (graduating in 1945). After two years as pastor of a Baptist church in New Hampshire, he gravitated towards the Episcopalian church, returned to academic study at Yale in 1947 (“after a long internal struggle”)¹ and was ordained an Episcopalian priest in 1952. Frei completed his PhD in 1956 under H. Richard Niebuhr, before beginning his academic career at Yale, where he remained as a highly valued and warmly regarded teacher and mentor until his unexpected and untimely death in September 1988.²

In Placher’s terms, Frei was undoubtedly a critic of the domestication of transcendence (see chapter 2) and his response to that issue informs a Christology that emphasises the unity of the particularity with the transcendence of Jesus Christ. Understanding this unity in Frei’s theology will be important for a constructive comparison with Bonhoeffer. Placher’s narrative could be understood to derive secondarily from Frei (the former was a student of Frei’s in the 1970s), however Frei’s work is more focussed than *The Domestication of Transcendence*, deriving from close attention to the consequences of modernity’s epistemological shift for biblical exegesis, whereas Placher’s book offers a broader narrative from a few steps further back. Nelson rightly suggests that Placher’s work is the theological “analog” to Frei’s

¹ William B. Placher, ‘Introduction’, in Hans W. Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, edited by George Hunsinger and William Placher (Oxford: OUP, 1993), 5.

² See George Hunsinger, ‘Forward’, in Hans W. Frei, *Reading Faithfully (vol. 1) Writings from the Archives: Theology and Hermeneutics*, edited by Mike Highton and Mark Allan Bowald (Oregon: Cascade, 2015), vii.

exegetical project,³ but there is also a sense in which Placher contextualises Frei's microanalysis. After a doctoral dissertation which directly addressed questions of revelation, epistemology and transcendence in Karl Barth's break with liberalism, Frei concerned himself primarily with how post-critical hermeneutics were negatively shaped by the epistemological assumptions of modernity—those same assumptions that Placher suggests lead to the domestication of transcendence. Frei then elucidated the Christological consequences of that domestication, positing an alternative approach to the historical particularity of Jesus in the Gospels, centred upon the way Jesus' identity is given in 'realistic' narrative form. Frei's critical and constructive work therefore functions as a particularly detailed approach to the problem Placher highlights in general.

This chapter begins by noting two aspects of Frei's doctoral dissertation on Barth: his broad awareness of the domestication of transcendence in modernity, and his comments about Barth's tendency to underplay Christological historicity in revelation. Thereafter, attention will be paid to two elements in Frei's work crucial to the way he helps us think about the transcendence of Jesus: firstly, a displacement of the category of 'factuality' as the linchpin of all hermeneutics; and secondly, a nuanced emphasis upon the centrality of the historical particularity of Jesus' identity. We will see that when the particular historicity of Jesus Christ as narrated in the gospels is insisted upon, but the temptation to make that insistence about factuality *per se* is resisted, historical particularity and transcendence cohere: the identity of Jesus as historically described ruptures categories of understanding. Jesus, in his historical particularity, transcends the attempt to grasp him, and this category-breaking historical particularity then constitutes a focus for a posture of theological humility.

³ "One way to understand Placher's thesis ... is to view it as a kind of theological analog to Frei's work on the exegetical errors of the Enlightenment." Derek Nelson, 'The Vulnerable and Transcendent God: The Postliberal Theology of William Placher', *Dialog* (44, 2005), 278.

I

Frei, Barth and Transcendence

Frei's doctoral dissertation locates Barth's 'break' with liberalism as beginning around 1915, and climaxing with the publication of the second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans* (1922).⁴ Barth, says Frei, seeks to replace a "confidence in the immediacy and trans-noetic directness of the presence of God to human awareness or activity",⁵ with an emphasis upon the total freedom of God in God's revelation to and activity for humanity—a "qualitative distinction"⁶ between God and the world that we can call God's transcendence. The novelty of Barth's break with liberalism is its "rejection of immediate experience as the source of faith."⁷ God remains transcendent—God's word and act towards humanity being contingent upon God's creative and redemptive freedom as One who is wholly other, rather than being bound by a human 'religious'/epistemological capability that turns upon the univocity described by Placher.⁸ As the free Creator, God's activity towards the world is the only grounds for human relationship to God.⁹

Frei drew attention to Anselm's influence upon Barth's understanding of the relation of faith to this ontological discontinuity, as seen in Barth's work, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*. The problem Barth faced was "how to elevate thought from the creature to

⁴ Hans W. Frei, *The Doctrine of Revelation In The Thought of Karl Barth, 1909–1922: The Nature of Barth's Break With Liberalism* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, 1956), iv.

⁵ Frei, *The Doctrine*, 2.

⁶ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Hoskins (Oxford: OUP, 1933), 39.

⁷ Frei, *The Doctrine*, 65. "That the promises of the faithfulness of God have been fulfilled in Jesus the Christ is not, and never will be, a self-evident truth ... because it is neither a cosmic happening within the natural order, nor even the most supreme event of our imaginings ... Faith is the faithfulness of God, ever secreted in and beyond all human ideas and affirmations about Him, and beyond every positive religious achievement." Barth, *Romans*, 98.

⁸ "Our relation to God is *ungodly*. We suppose that we know what we are saying when we say 'God'. We assign to Him the highest place in our world: and in so doing we place Him fundamentally on one line with ourselves and with things. We assume that we are able to arrange our relation to Him as we arrange our other relationships ... Secretly we ourselves are the masters in this relationship." Barth, *Romans*, 44.

⁹ "The issue ... is to see the originality of the infinite as the origin and goal of the finite, to see the path from the infinite to the finite, rather than the path from the finite to the infinite ... if one sees the path from the infinite to the finite, one sees God in his relation to his creature. But this path, this view of God in his relation to his creature is possible only from God himself. It is a word that God alone speaks." Frei, *The Doctrine*, 110–111.

the Creator other than by taking for granted their ‘religious’ togetherness or sundering faith and reason”.¹⁰ Barth understood that Anselm’s ontological rationale concerning the ‘necessity’ of God’s existence is fundamentally dissimilar to the epistemological attempts of Descartes or Leibniz to rationalise the existence of God. As we saw in the previous chapter, Anselm’s faith seeking understanding—‘*fides quarens intellectum*’—contrasts with the character of enlightenment epistemology, and cultivates a profound ‘posture of humility’ in theology.

It is a question of the proof of faith by faith which was already established in itself without proof. And both—faith that is proved and faith that proves—Anselm expressly understands not as presuppositions that can be achieved by man but as presuppositions that have been achieved by God, the former as divine *donare* and the latter as divine *illuminare* ... God gave himself to him to know and he was able to know God ... God gave himself as the object of his knowledge and God illumined him that he might know him as object.¹¹

God gives Godself to be known in faith—understood by Barth as a participation in the being of God, by God’s grace.¹² Therefore, although “all theological thesis are inadequate to their object”,¹³ theology is not rendered meaningless. Rather, God in Godself is prior to the knowledge of God:

The reality of the knowledge of God, Barth always contends, is based on God’s self-revelation: hence, where the Word of God is given effectively to men, they, through this Word, know God. This fundamental reality is absolutely basic: the very question of its *possibility* can be raised only on the grounds of, or posterior to, its actuality.¹⁴

Christology, therefore, cannot investigate Jesus as the actualisation of human religious experience, but must attempt to articulate “the eternal ground for Jesus Christ’s incarnation within the objective ground of the relation of God to man.”¹⁵ Thus, “[i]n the act of incarnation and nowhere else do we see the concreteness of that God (and

¹⁰ Frei, *The Doctrine*, 193.

¹¹ Karl Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum: Anselm’s Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of his Theological Scheme* (London: SCM, 1960), 170–171.

¹² Barth, *Anselm*, 17; Frei, *The Doctrine*, 194.

¹³ Frei, *The Doctrine*, 196.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Frei, *The Doctrine*, 127.

of his relation to us) in whom lies the ground of the divine human-relationship”.¹⁶ Jesus Christ is anything but an immanent mitigation of God’s transcendence, but rather, as Anderson argues, is the transcendent act of God within history.¹⁷

Frei will carry these emphases forward into his later works. Knight points out the correlation between Barth’s “priority of ontology over epistemology” and the insistence on “the priority of the biblical narrative in theology” that Frei will develop in subsequent writings.¹⁸ Similarly, Campbell includes both Barth and Frei under the definition ‘Anselmian’, referring to Frei’s “appropriation of Barth’s Anselmian theology as a viable theological option, and his development of a distinctive theological position consistent with it.”¹⁹ Barth’s theology turns upon the undomesticated transcendence of God, and in a similar way, the critique of post-enlightenment hermeneutics that Frei develops (as we will see below) leads to a constructive approach to reading the scriptural narratives which itself manifests a theologically grounded posture of humility.

However, Frei is not uncritical of Barth, especially in terms of the Christological consequences of the “radical doctrine of the absolute transcendence of the divine over man and the world”,²⁰ and on that basis he observes that Barth veers towards “epistemological monophysitism”—wherein the historical/personal aspect in Christology is underplayed because Barth does not want to infer knowledge of God from human history.²¹ This aspect of Frei’s thought is well recognised,²² but what is not articulated (understandably) is the commonality between Frei and Bonhoeffer that this critique illuminates—Bonhoeffer expressing similar concerns about the failure of Barth’s theology of revelation to properly integrate history (especially in *Act and Being*, and less fully but more infamously in *Letters and Papers from Prison*). Understanding

¹⁶ Frei, *The Doctrine*, 134.

¹⁷ Ray S. Anderson, *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), 107.

¹⁸ John A. Knight, ‘The Barthian Heritage of Hans W. Frei’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* (61, 2008), 310.

¹⁹ Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei’s Postliberal Theology* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 8. See also George Hunsinger, ‘Forward’, in Frei, *Reading Faithfully*, vii.

²⁰ Hans W. Frei, ‘German Theology: Transcendence and Secularity’, in Charles E. McClelland and Steven P. Scher (eds.), *Postwar German Culture* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974), 102.

²¹ Frei, *The Doctrine*, 576.

²² See especially Mike Higton, *Christ, Providence and History: Hans W. Frei’s Public Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 54–59.

Frei's criticism of Barth is therefore important as we keep a comparison between Frei and Bonhoeffer on the horizon.

That Frei would take up this stance in relation to Barth is not surprising given the influence of H. Richard Niebuhr. Seeking to temper the contingency of Barth's theology of revelation with the sensibilities learned from Ernst Troeltsch's historical relativism (see below) Niebuhr emphasised that,

whatever it was that the church meant to say, whatever was revealed or manifested to it could be indicated only in connection with an historical person and events in the life of his community. The confession referred to history and was consciously made in history.²³

Along the same lines of Niebuhr's approach to Barth, then, Frei suggests that Barth tends to "deprecate the content of the historical (in the critical-exegetical sense) knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth"²⁴ by virtue of his insistence that revelation is never a continuous state of affairs within history, but always the act of God from without. Frei thinks this insistence could easily develop into a "tendency to systematize in a dangerous fashion the relation between revelation and historical knowledge."²⁵ Frei therefore puts the following question to Barth:

Is this tendency towards systematization of the objectivity of revelation, and the grounding of the revelation-faith relationship in it, not actually detrimental to genuine objectivity, because it tends toward the transcendence of every concrete content in anthropology? ... Does Christology mean that a genuine appreciation of creaturely conditions, to be set over against and in concert with Incarnation and redemption becomes an impossibility?²⁶

In other words, if Jesus Christ is understood only in relation to the pure contingency of revelation and not in relation to the history towards and in which God acts, then Christology veers towards the 'epistemologically monophysite'. As Frei put it in a later article,

²³ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 23.

²⁴ Frei, *The Doctrine*, 576.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Frei, *The Doctrine*, 575–576.

As a human historical figure [Jesus] is simply ‘there’, but neither his life nor his teaching seems to have much connection with his personhood or with the historical-revelatory connection with us. The historical figure of Jesus is not significantly illuminated in ‘revelation’.²⁷

Mike Higton emphasises how a critical alternative to this monophysite tendency is a fundamental part of Frei’s work throughout his career. Frei, says Higton, utilises Barth’s fundamental theological orientations as regards the epistemological problems of the enlightenment, whilst offering a more nuanced approach to the place of historicity, particularly in Christology.²⁸

Frei’s critique of Barth must not be interpreted as a dilution of radical, transcendent Christocentrism. As Higton puts it, in relation to other theologians of his generation, Frei certainly “left Niebuhr’s classroom through the door marked ‘Barth’”.²⁹

Sonderegger agrees that affinity with Barth characterises Frei’s response to post-enlightenment hermeneutical issues, and describes Frei’s own orientation as evidencing an appropriately “chastened”, but nevertheless “orthodox” form of monophysitism.³⁰ Frei, she argues, does indeed give a rationale for historicity in Christology, but demonstrates the inseparability of the historical identity of Jesus Christ from his presence as “the One that simply is Jesus Christ, the Living Lord.”³¹ Frei’s response to Barth is therefore not to soften the utter transcendence of Jesus Christ, but to notice that Barth’s own critical response to the problem of domesticated transcendence requires careful nuance, such that ‘chastened monophysitism’ is an appropriate corrective.

Following Higton we recognise that Frei’s study of biblical exegesis, to which we now turn, has this nuanced understanding of Barth’s response to the domestication of transcendence in the background. Below, we will see how Frei resists the post-enlightenment urge to subject the meaning of the gospel narratives in particular to broader categories of universal reason and historical criticism. To use Placher’s terms,

²⁷ Hans W. Frei, ‘The Theology of Richard H. Niebuhr’, in Paul Ramsey (ed.), *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 106.

²⁸ Higton, *Christ*, 54–60.

²⁹ Higton, *Christ*, 25.

³⁰ Katherine Sonderegger, ‘Epistemological Monophysitism in Karl Barth and Hans Frei’, *Pro Ecclesia* (22, 2013), 260.

³¹ Sonderegger, ‘Epistemological’, 262.

that ‘domesticates’ the meaning of those narratives. Frei recognises that if we read scripture as narrating the transcendent activity of God, then human categories of understanding must yield to the actual content of the narrative itself, with the expectation that those categories may be ruptured. Yet, also recognising a tendency towards epistemological monophysitism, he would stress that this narrative remains one of God’s activity in and towards the historical world, so that such a rupture in epistemological categories need not—indeed should not—endanger the place of historicity within a theology of revelation. In chapter 5 we will see the extent to which Bonhoeffer’s approach to Barth’s early theology has a very similar shape.

II

Eclipse: Hermeneutics and Transcendence

The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative (hereafter *Eclipse*) itself lays the ground for Frei’s constructive Christological proposal that we will draw on for our account of Jesus’ transcendence. Post-publication, Frei described *Eclipse* as an attempt to “point out a category error... together with something of its background and its eventual ramifications.”³² That ‘category error’ is the confusion between two things: on one hand, the way the literal or realistic sense of a text coheres with its meaning; and on the other, the relation of that coherence to the category of historical factuality.³³ By ‘realistic’, Frei is referring to “the comparatively unadorned and meager biblical accounts, the comparatively unexalted and straightforward manner in which the divine or supernatural enters an ordinary world and ordinary experience, in contrast to a rightly proliferated, mysterious exaltation of the ordinary into unity with primal mystery.”³⁴ From the late seventeenth century onwards, says Frei, the relationship between narrative and meaning was defined by the question of how a realistic, or ‘history-like’ text coheres with rational observation of the known world—whether as factual report of a natural or supernatural occurrence, or as a myth alluding to a deeper truth accessible by universal reason—and the question of how that text’s meaning can be grasped universally and individually. This reduction of exegesis to the

³² Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 61.

³³ Frei, *Identity*, p.60.

³⁴ Hans W. Frei, ‘Letter to Professor Ray L. Hart, January 12, 1976’, in Frei, *Reading Faithfully*, 18.

question of fact, making it a fundamentally “apologetical enterprise” geared towards articulating the factuality of Christianity,³⁵ was itself a symptom of the problem of faith and history that characterised the modern period, and the rise of what Niebuhr calls “Culture Protestantism”—i.e. the theology characteristic of liberal Protestant thinkers.³⁶

Concerning that problem of faith and history, Gotthold Lessing (1729–1781) argued in 1777 that reports of past miraculous events in history could not possibly operate as satisfactory ‘proofs’ of Christianity’s truth, because they were not universally available to empirical examination. The ‘medium’ of historical testimony cannot bear the miraculous—seminally, the incarnation—for the reports are simply reports, which themselves are not enough to justify the apparent contradiction of reason involved in believing a miracle. The testimony is not the event, and therefore “no longer has any spirit or power, but has sunk to the level of human testimonies of spirit and power.”³⁷ Thus Lessing’s statement, “the accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason.”³⁸ Frei paraphrased Lessing thus:

If I can’t experience it myself but have to take the word of others, what use is it? ... If I had lived at the time of Christ—fine; or if I experience miracles done by believing Christians, and experience prophecy fulfillment *now*—fine. I would have subjugated my reason to him, or to claims made in his name, gladly.³⁹

³⁵ Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 122. Frei later summarised, “the story of modern Christian theology (beginning with the end of the seventeenth century) is increasingly, indeed, almost exclusively that of anthropological and Christological apologetics”. Hans W. Frei, ‘Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal’, in Frei, *Theology and Narrative*, 27.

³⁶ In *Christ and Culture*, Niebuhr describes theologians who espouse this approach as “non-revolutionaries who find no need for positing ‘cracks in time’—fall and incarnation and judgement and resurrection. In modern history this type is well known, since for generations it has been dominant in a large section of Protestantism. Inadequately defined by the use of such terms as ‘liberal’ and ‘liberalism’, is [*sic*] is more aptly named Culture Protestantism, but appearances of the type have not been confined to the modern world nor to the church of the Reformation.” H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 84. Frei also connects apologetics and Culture Protestantism in his dissertation, saying “[a]pologetics is nothing more than the technical expression of culture theology”. Frei, *The Doctrine*, 69.

³⁷ Gotthold Lessing, ‘On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power’, in *Lessing’s Theological Writings*, edited by Henry Chadwick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1956), 52.

³⁸ Lessing, ‘Proof’, 53.

³⁹ Hans W. Frei, ‘The Formation of German Religious thought in the Passage from Enlightenment to Romanticism RS371b (YDS 13-199)’, in Hans W. Frei, *Unpublished Pieces: Transcripts from the Yale Divinity*

The implication is that truths attested to by history-like testimony must be verified and assented to by virtue of a broader and deeper category of understanding, and this means looking past the history-like narrative to that which is more universally—and less particularly—expressible in terms of general truths. Lamb calls this Lessing’s “radical empiricism”,⁴⁰ for one’s own empirical reasoning sets the criteria for the meaningfulness of claims of religious truth.⁴¹

Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) similarly insisted that Christian truth/doctrine must be articulated inside a ‘modern’ approach to history, by which he meant an understanding of the fundamental relativity of historical phenomena. Whilst, as Fulford describes, Troeltsch does not deny that events can be unique *per se*, he maintains that “[s]uch uniqueness ... does not remove a phenomenon from the web of causal relations, nor is it inconsistent with some degree of similarity with other events: an event may be irreducibly individual without being wholly unlike any other.”⁴² Every event, says Troeltsch, is “a uniquely conditioned disclosure of life”,⁴³ but is such only relatively in relation to ‘life’ itself. A universal cannot be absolutely (that is, without possible supersession) derived from a particular, and Troeltsch therefore denies that the absoluteness of Christian faith can be based upon the metaphysical uniqueness of any historical event—especially the particular life of Jesus.⁴⁴

School Archive, edited by Mike Higton (1998–2004, available at <http://community.dur.ac.uk/mike.higton/transcripts/Freicomplete.pdf>).

⁴⁰ William Lamb, *Scripture: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 46.

⁴¹ “[t]o jump with that historical truth to a quite different class of truths, and to demand of me that I should form all my metaphysical and moral ideas accordingly; to expect me to alter all my fundamental ideas of the nature of the Godhead because I cannot set any credible testimony against the resurrection of Christ; if that is not a *μετάβασις εἰς ἄλλο γένος*, then I do not know what Aristotle meant by his phrase.” Lessing, ‘Proof’, 54. ‘Aristotle’s phrase’ refers to the incommensurability between two levels of thinking—here, faith and history.

⁴² Ben Fulford, *Divine Eloquence and Human Transformation: Rethinking Scripture and History through Gregory of Nazianzus and Hans Frei* (Fortress: Minneapolis, 2013), 20.

⁴³ Ernst Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*, trans. Reid (London: SCM, 1972), 63.

⁴⁴ “[T]he identification of the Christian claim with the original, individual, historical figure who is the source of its religious orientation” should be “totally disregarded”, given that fact that “history itself has already annihilated them in principle.” Troeltsch, *Absoluteness*, 158–159.

Most problematic of all ... is the interpreting of Christianity as the absolute religion ... not only because ... no such demonstration is possible in historical terms, but above all because the impossibility of uniting a theoretically conceived universal principle with a concrete, individual, historical configuration becomes directly discernable at this point.⁴⁵

For Lessing and Troeltsch, the ultimate truth of Christianity must be demonstrated according to supra-historical ‘universal reason’, not according to a particular historical event. As such, the relationship between particular historical events and the ‘truths’ of Christianity is called into question, and the problem of faith and history arises.

In *Eclipse* Frei implies that we should interrogate how this problem of faith and history is beholden to a pre-determined and de-limited conception of rationality, and in its place recover something of the character of pre-critical ‘narrative’ reading of scripture. If we do so, he maintains, the impasse between faith and history is recast in less problematic a light. Schnier describes Frei’s agenda as “both a refusal and a retrieval within Christian theology. The retrieval is for something we used to do as Christians, and the refusal is of things we tend to prefer to do with the biblical text, but we ought not to do.”⁴⁶ If we explicate this ‘refusal’ and ‘retrieval’ in terms of transcendence, then the understanding of transcendence which turns upon the domesticating characteristics laid out in the previous chapter is refused, and a concept of transcendence unlimited by rationalist epistemology, yet able to articulate the importance of historical particularity, is retrieved.

To draw attention to the hermeneutical approach that was ‘eclipsed’ in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Frei highlights two theologians who also feature in Placher’s thesis: Luther and Calvin. Without suggesting an unmediated recovery of their exegetical practices, Frei shows that key aspects of their approaches to scripture offer an alternative to the critical sundering of narrative and meaning that implies the incompatibility of faith and history. Despite significant divergence in theological content, says Frei, Luther and Calvin’s exegetical practices witness jointly to the key characteristics of this pre-critical period.

⁴⁵ Troeltsch, *Absoluteness*, 70.

⁴⁶ George P. Schnier, ‘The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: Analysis and Critique’, *Modern Theology* (8, 1992), 152.

First, they agreed upon the “self-interpreting” character of the Bible—“the literal sense of its words being their true meaning”.⁴⁷ Technically, Frei calls this “the primacy of the grammatical sense”,⁴⁸ highlighting that the reformers would have rejected any idea that the meaning of a text had to be found elsewhere than the text itself—i.e. in a deeper or separately deduced layer of significance.

Secondly, Frei describes the assumption that the historical sense of the text cohered with the actual world that they themselves inhabited, meaning that the ‘history-likeness’ of the text was a “natural concomitant of its making literal sense.”⁴⁹ By ‘history-likeness’ Frei means that the narratives themselves revolve around “the intercourse and destinies of ordinary and credible individuals rather than stylized or mythical hero figures, flawed or otherwise”,⁵⁰ and he follows Erich Auerbach’s suggestion that, bar obvious genre exceptions, this history-likeness is “characteristic of the Bible.”⁵¹ The meaning of the text, therefore, is inseparable from its realism—the text being understood to yield a meaning that belongs in the kind of world we inhabit.

Thirdly, pre-critical theologians practiced *figural reading*, wherein historically depicted characters and events are read as ‘figures’ or ‘types’ of God’s activity (ultimately in Jesus Christ) without those characters and events losing their own historical particularity. Here Frei is most indebted to Auerbach, whose own account of early Christian figural reading, notably laid out by John Dawson, sought to articulate how “the spiritual character of figural reading protected rather than subverted the historical reality of figural persons or events, because spirituality was ultimately a matter of the impact of the historical Jesus on historical human beings.”⁵² For Auerbach figural reading as practiced by the church fathers is not about discerning an abstracted meaning to which the figural relationship points (a “third thing that both

⁴⁷ Frei, *Eclipse*, 18–19.

⁴⁸ Frei, *Eclipse*, 19.

⁴⁹ Frei, *Eclipse*, 2.

⁵⁰ Frei, *Eclipse*, 14. Fulford describes “[t]he depiction of characters and circumstances by their mutual interactions through chronological sequence renders a world that resembles the historical world of which we have become aware, with its interweaving of actions and events in a complex, continuous causal web of contingencies.” Fulford, *Divine Eloquence*, 199.

⁵¹ Frei, *Eclipse*, 15.

⁵² John D. Dawson, *Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California, 2001), 83.

shared”).⁵³ Rather, ‘meaning’ is “a statement about a relation”⁵⁴—the actual relationship between the figure (e.g. Moses) and the fulfillment (Christ) both of which are historically particular. As Auerbach put it, for a theologian like Tertullian “Moses is no less historical and real because he is an *umbra* or *figura* of Christ, and Christ, the fulfillment, is not abstract idea, but also a historical reality.”⁵⁵ Readers discern a relationship between historical persons and events that witnesses to God’s activity in the world according to God’s plan.⁵⁶ Therefore, to say that one history-like narrative is figurative of another is not to suggest that the historical narrative really means something else, beyond its historicity. Rather, says Frei,

In the service of the one temporally sequential reality the stories become figures of one another without losing their independent or self-contained status. With regard to its own depicted time span, each narrative is literally descriptive; of the whole sequence and its coherence in theme as well as time, all of them together form one literal narrative, by means of earlier and later stories becoming figures one of the other.⁵⁷

Auerbach therefore illuminated for Frei the fact that figural reading belongs alongside the centrality of the history-likeness of the text, and indeed in a later essay Frei comments on the indispensability of the former for a Christian understanding of historicity.⁵⁸ The scriptures could therefore be understood to depict “one cumulative story”⁵⁹ that reaches its climax in Jesus, and also by which the exegetes themselves could understand the relation of their own historical existence to the activity of God in Christ. Where Auerbach, however, had described the Bible as a dominant agent that overtakes all other realities of its own accord, Frei focussed on the practice of *figura* as the means by which the church understood world history in relation to the Bible

⁵³ Dawson, *Figural*, 92.

⁵⁴ Dawson, *Figural*, 94.

⁵⁵ Erich Auerbach, ‘Figura’, in Erich Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (New York: Meridian, 1959), 34.

⁵⁶ Dawson, *Figural*, 87.

⁵⁷ Frei, *Eclipse*, 28.

⁵⁸ “[S]omething like [figural reading] is indispensable if we are going to give descriptive substance to the claim that history is the story of the providential governance of God the Father of Jesus Christ among humankind.” Hans W. Frei, ‘History, Salvation-History, and Typology’, in Hans W. Frei, *Reading Faithfully*, 157.

⁵⁹ Frei, *Eclipse*, 2.

stories.⁶⁰ As in other pre-critical praxes Frei highlights, figural reading keeps the *sense* of a text and its historical *reference* together—not in such a way that sense and reference were “conceived to be in harmony with each other” but rather that, in the pre-critical period, “they had not even been generally distinct issues.”⁶¹

However, this union of sense and reference begins to separate in the seventeenth century, following theologians like Spinoza (1634–1677) for whom scripture’s historical reference is subjugated to its aim of instructing human beings towards religious devotion;⁶² and Cocceius (1603–1669) for whom the text pointed away from itself towards supra-mundane stages of salvation history.⁶³ As this separation became more pronounced into the eighteenth century, Frei says, the assumed unity of text and historical reference was severed, and figural reading was disenfranchised of its historicity.

[S]imply by virtue of the question of the factuality of revelation as an independent, critical inquiry ... the harmony of historical fact, literal sense and religious truth will at best have to be demonstrated; at worst, some explanation of the religious truth of the fact-like description will have to be given in the face of a negative verdict on its factual accuracy or veracity.⁶⁴

As the eighteenth century ran into the nineteenth, Frei notes a further shift in exegetical focus that did not overcome the previous severing of sense and reference, but which added a further level of complexity to the hermeneutical task. Now, hermeneutical and historical investigation was concerned not only with the relationship between the meaning of the text and its history-like referents, but, under the influence of the nineteenth century’s “romantic and idealistic revolution”,⁶⁵ was also concerned with the *consciousness* behind the text, and the process by which the text comes into being. “[T]he focus of inquiry now becomes the unitary structure of

⁶⁰ See Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God’s story: Bible, Church and narrative theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 142.

⁶¹ Frei, *Eclipse*, 56.

⁶² Frei, *Eclipse*, 43–46. Re. Spinoza, see Jacob L. Goodson, *Narrative Theology and the Hermeneutical Virtues: Humility, Patience, Prudence* (London: Lexington, 2015), 62.

⁶³ Frei, *Eclipse*, 46–50.

⁶⁴ Frei, *Eclipse*, 56.

⁶⁵ Frei, *Eclipse*, 282.

understanding rather than the written text as such.”⁶⁶ Here the fundamental post-enlightenment category error retained its force, and is added to by these later developments.

Frei therefore summarises his proposal in *Eclipse* as follows:

All the more fascinating, in view of this hermeneutical revolution and its large effect on biblical stories, is the continuity of the fate of a narrative reading of biblical stories, continuity that remained unbroken from the days of Deism through the first third of the nineteenth century—unchanged by whatever else happened in biblical study. The realistic narrative reading of biblical stories, the gospels in particular, went into eclipse throughout the period.⁶⁷

Frei recognised that this hermeneutical ‘eclipse’ of the narrative reading of the gospels reflected the angst of Culture Protestantism concerning the relationship between revelation and history. Firstly, can universal revelation be intelligibly conceived as occurring in and towards the particular history and culture of Israel (“a tiny, rude, and isolated fraction of the human race”)?⁶⁸ Secondly, can narratives of revelation be understood to refer in their own particular way to a general universal truth, or is the idea of divine revelation (which surely has to be universal) essentially meaningless? Thirdly, can the *texts* that authoritatively yield the content/meaning of this revelation be proved to be factual, or rational, or is some other articulation of the way they yield meaning necessary? In eighteenth century England, says Frei, these textual questions were primarily addressed by investigating the scriptures in relation to external evidence for their conformity to fact; and in Germany, the emphasis was on the internal questions of textual criticism, and how the texts could be seen to function rationally or coherently. The differences notwithstanding, the concept of revelation is subjugated to a post-enlightenment concept of universal reason, and faith in God’s activity towards world becomes defined by the need to explain such activity within rationalistic confines. That the texts can be witnessing to something for which the epistemological categories of Culture Protestantism are in some way inadequate is not a real possibility. Such exegetical practice therefore reflects the domestication of transcendence.

⁶⁶ Frei, *Eclipse*, 323.

⁶⁷ Frei, *Eclipse*, 324.

⁶⁸ Frei, *Eclipse*, 52.

Frei divided the plethora of exegetical tendencies at the turn of the eighteenth century into two groups, which in turn can be subdivided. On the one hand, there were those who believed the subject matter of the text referred *ostensively* (meaning it describes a “state of affairs in the spatio-temporal world”)⁶⁹ and on the other hand, those who believed it did not. Within the former category there are three main subdivisions. First, a ‘supernaturalist’ approach argued for the factual credibility of miracle narratives as Divine activity within the historical world; second, a ‘naturalist’ approach sought a scientific (and concomitantly, *non*-supernatural) explanation at the root of the reports of miraculous occurrences (for example, freak weather patterns); and third, some simply argued that the ostensive reference of the text was an intentional deception by the evangelists.⁷⁰

Those who believed the subject matter of the text was not ostensive understood the texts as narratives that communicated deeper universal or moral truths, like myths or fables. This included the belief that the authors intended allegory, and thus deliberately wrote something other than what they meant to communicate; the belief that the authors meant exactly what they wrote, but that the pure universal meaning of whatever they wrote was “the advancement of a pure moral disposition in the inner man and its connection with the ideal realm of ends”;⁷¹ and finally the belief that the meaning of the text lies within the culturally and historically conditioned consciousness of the author as manifested in what they intended to write. Frei calls this latter option the ‘mythophile’ approach. Its adherents saw the meaning of the biblical texts neither in “the events to which they referred, nor in the ideas supposedly stated in them in narrative form, but in the consciousness they represented.”⁷²

One such mythophile, D. F. Strauss, epitomised for Frei the way a post-enlightenment conception of the impasse between *Glaube* and *Wissenschaft* eclipsed a narrative reading of the biblical texts. To Frei’s mind, Strauss articulated most incisively the problem that a rationalist approach to faith and history presents for hermeneutics in general,

⁶⁹ Frei, *Eclipse*, 256.

⁷⁰ Frei, *Eclipse*, 261.

⁷¹ Frei, *Eclipse*, 262.

⁷² Frei, *Eclipse*, 265.

and also, crucially for this thesis, with particular reference to the identity of Jesus (see chapter 1, re the ‘quests’ for the historical Jesus). Strauss both exemplified the kind of position Frei wanted to reject, and yet recognised something of the inescapability of the biblical texts’ history-likeness, therefore ironically supporting Frei’s determined resistance of a Barthian epistemological monophysitism. Let us consider Strauss for a moment.

In an essay on Strauss, Frei pointed out that as far as Strauss was concerned, Christology—specifically the soteriological and epistemological status of Jesus—“constituted the chief test” in the discussion of faith, history and hermeneutics.⁷³ Discussions of meaning and historical reference came to a head in the topic of the life and meaning of Jesus: “were the writings about him accurate, and did their factual truth or falsity constitute decisive evidence for or against the other, *viz.*, doctrinal information about him?”⁷⁴

In *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1835) Strauss argued that the doctrinal claims about Jesus’ divine-human identity cannot be grounded in historical fact, due to the incredibility of the miraculous and divine elements in the history-like gospel narratives about him. Against Schleiermacher—who in Strauss’ view produced a false hybrid between faith and history in his account of the historical Jesus’ God consciousness as the locus of the gospel—Strauss believed that the meaning of the gospel could not be at one with the history-like narratives of Jesus’ life. Instead, those narratives are ‘true’ only insofar as they non-ostensively manifest a central Christological ‘idea’. They do this through what Frei calls “unconscious folk poetizing”,⁷⁵ expressing the true idea via the myth-making consciousness of their times, meaning that the gospels’ reference to ‘fact’ is inseparable from the mythical mindset of the authors: the socio-religiously shaped “thought world” of first century Messianic expectations, and shared by the ‘historical’ Jesus himself.⁷⁶ Strauss did not deny Jesus had existed, but believed that the texts about him referred not in a purely historical way, but derived their shape from a more universal—and supra-historical—concept of religious meaning.

⁷³ Hans W. Frei, ‘David Friedrich Strauss’, in Ninian Smart, John Clayton, Patrick Sherry and Steven T. Katz (eds.), *Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: CUP, 1985), 219.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Frei, ‘Strauss’, 235.

⁷⁶ Frei, *Eclipse*, 235–236.

As opposite as this seems to Frei's thinking, Strauss' position was in part based upon a position about the history-likeness of the texts that Frei would agree with. The problem for Strauss, as Frei saw it, was that having perceived history-likeness, Strauss subjected it to a dichotomised view of faith and history. Firstly, Strauss recognised that the Jesus of the gospels cannot be split off such that some aspects of his historicity constitute the 'divine' meaning with the rest being incidental (such as he believed Schleiermacher to have done).⁷⁷ Furthermore, unlike pagan myths, the scriptures envision the interaction of a transcendent deity with a historical world, and even the narrative of the incarnation is perceived not to crudely anthropomorphise God, but to point to something more nuanced.⁷⁸ However, despite such insight, particularly into the nature of Jesus' history-likeness in the gospels and the character of the biblical texts in general, Strauss concluded that the scriptures mean truthfully by mythical reference, because such an historical interaction between God and the world is simply "inadmissible from our point of view".⁷⁹ He performs what Frei calls "a reduction to the historical issue of fact vs. fiction, and to the corresponding hermeneutical issue of literal-ostensive vs. mythical meaning or subject matter."⁸⁰ Strauss' own inability to see past the post-enlightenment dichotomy is ironically illustrated, says Frei, by the way he came tantalisingly close to appreciating the realistic narrative character of scripture, but finally fell back on the eighteenth century's category error, simply not allowing for the possibility that divine revelation could be historically narrated. As Loughlin has it, theologians like Strauss "take the literal to be the historical" but "find the historical incredible."⁸¹

⁷⁷ "[A]n historical individual is that which appears of him ... his internal nature is known by his words and actions, the condition of his age and nation are a part of his individuality." Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, trans. Eliot (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1898), 77.

⁷⁸ Strauss rather disdainfully describes "the domestic occupations and the trivial pursuits of the Homeric deities" (Strauss, *The Life*, 40) in contrast to which, he believed, "the biblical history does not equally with the heathen mythology offend our idea of Deity." Strauss, *The Life*, 78. In the Old Testament, says Strauss, "the divine nature does not appear to be essentially affected by the temporal character of its operation" (Strauss, *The Life*, 77); and in Christological terms, "[t]he birth, growth, miracles, sufferings, death, and resurrection of Christ, are circumstances belonging to the density of the Messiah, above which God remains unaffected in his own changeless identity." *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Strauss, *The Life*, 80.

⁸⁰ Frei, *Eclipse*, 275.

⁸¹ Loughlin, *Telling*, 120.

Frei's agreement with Strauss, therefore, is that the post-enlightenment perception of the problem of faith and history requires the 'truth' of Christianity to be relativised away from history, and the historical reference of the texts construed mythically. Yet, as Higton explains, unlike Strauss, Frei himself will not accept that assumption:

[H]e refused to begin by asking how Christian faith could possibly fit into the constraining grid of historical *Wissenschaft*. Rather, he committed himself to finding the proper location within Christian faith for something like the historical world of Strauss and Troeltsch.⁸²

To Frei's mind, the gospels' history-likeness can just as much point away from, rather than towards, the problem of faith and history. Therefore, says Higton,

Frei's work can be seen, without too much distortion, as one long attempt to laugh at Strauss—not because he has found a way of ignoring him, but because he has learned to defeat Strauss with Strauss' own tools.⁸³

Frei is not simply advocating intellectual nostalgia, as if the questions of the enlightenment simply need to be ignored. As Bonhoeffer had already put it, and as we shall see below, a theological response to the enlightenment in the form of such nostalgia is “only a counsel of despair, a sacrifice made only at the cost of intellectual integrity. It's a dream to the tune of ‘Oh, if only I knew the road back, the long road to childhood's land’.”⁸⁴ Rather, in addition to the very obvious positive challenges the enlightenment posed to clericalism, authoritarianism, and autocracy, the hermeneutical question of faith and history as thrown up by post-enlightenment epistemology calls for a sophisticated answer that it is to Christianity's *advantage* to articulate. We do Frei's position a disservice if we make him purely nostalgic. Nevertheless, despite the validity of the questions posed by post-enlightenment epistemological assumptions, Frei's alternative can only be articulated by standing apart from them.

⁸² Higton, *Christ*, 34–35.

⁸³ Higton, *Christ*, 35. The phrase ‘to laugh at Strauss’ is derived from Barth, who said that Strauss’ question must be loved, then “laughed at”. Frei wants to talk about “what it might mean to laugh, but to laugh fairly and not sarcastically, and not in a fashion that might turn to gallows humour.” Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1992), 11.

⁸⁴ *LPP*, 478.

Recall, then, the two elements of Frei's thought outlined at the start of this chapter: Firstly, the post-critical hermeneutical category error outlined in *Eclipse* is symptomatic of a domesticated account of transcendence. Frei is critiquing the conceptually reductionist boundaries of a delimited concept of 'universal reason', by looking in considerable detail at the hermeneutical implications of such reductionism. In Garrett Green's words, his approach "gives theologians some breathing room by allowing the literal sense of the text to come into focus without its becoming immediately confused with historical questions".⁸⁵ The 'breathing room' to which Green refers alludes spatially to the kind of posture of humility necessary for theological thought—a posture which in Frei's context means resisting the attempt to hold meaning inside the boundaries of a post-enlightenment model of rationality, and that leaves room for practices like figural reading, where modernity does not. Sounding a different note to his approach to Barth in his doctoral thesis, Frei's introduction to *Eclipse* suggests that Barth, in *Church Dogmatics*, demonstrates that kind of undomesticated approach to reading scripture.⁸⁶

Secondly, Frei exposes a disconnect between the historicity of Jesus and the meaning of the narratives about him. In seeking to correct such a skewed approach to Christology, he addresses a problem that must be overcome for a satisfactory account of Jesus' transcendence. What Frei implies in *Eclipse* is that if the meaning of Jesus is not reduced to historical prove-ability but understood as at one with the history-like descriptions of him, then an account of his identity, including his unity with God and his transcendence, is anything but de-historicised, but instead is bound up entirely with his historical particularity. In other words, Frei seeks to articulate in detail what Anderson suggests more broadly: that the gospels describe the historical activity of God, who is wholly other, towards and in the world in Christ. This Frei seeks to articulate by recovering that which was eclipsed in the eighteenth and nineteenth

⁸⁵ Garrett Green, 'Fictional narrative and scriptural truth', in Garrett Green (ed.), *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 80.

⁸⁶ Barth, says Frei, "distinguishes historical from realistic reading of the theologically most significant biblical narratives, without falling into the trap of instantly making history the test of the *meaning* of the realistic form of the stories," Frei, *Eclipse*, viii. Frei refers particularly to a portion of volume II of *Church Dogmatics* (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2: The Doctrine of God*, trans. G. W. Bromily et al. (London, T & T Clark, 2004), 340–409) of which Higon provides a detailed summary, in the light of Frei's comments. See Higon, *Christ*, 155–163.

centuries—i.e. the reading of the Gospels as texts whose meaning is at one with their realistic narrative.

This focus on Christological historicity complements, of course, Frei's dissatisfaction with Barth's epistemological monophysitism. In *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, Frei's desire to avoid such an error coheres naturally with his protest against the sundering of narrative and meaning. In moving to examine this work, therefore, the shape of Frei's constructive contribution to an account of Jesus' transcendence begins to come into view.

III

Identity: Unsubstitutability and Transcendence

The Identity of Jesus Christ (henceforth *Identity*) is grounded on Frei's recovery of a pre-critical approach to the biblical narrative *qua* narrative, as argued for in *Eclipse*, building a constructive Christological alternative to the hermeneutical category errors exposed in the former work.⁸⁷ In addition, two other papers by Frei—"Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection" (1966) and 'Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal' (1967)—address the same issues and thus will be drawn on to supplement this analysis.

Frei's Christological alternative can be described in two stages: firstly, that Christology must begin from the question of Jesus' identity (i.e. *who* it is we are talking about) rather than his presence (i.e. what it means to say that someone who lived in first century Palestine is 'present' now). Whereas the latter question could proceed on quite abstract terms, Frei will argue that Jesus' identity is yielded most meaningfully when

⁸⁷ Although *The Identity of Jesus Christ* was published in 1975—a year after *Eclipse*—the former was in fact a revised version of an earlier journal essay, 'The Mystery of the Presence of Jesus Christ' (1967). Nevertheless, to think of *Identity* as the theoretical successor to *Eclipse* is to follow Frei's own reflection, insofar as he understood *Eclipse* to elucidate the category error to which *Identity* demonstrated an alternative (Frei, *Identity*, 60–61); and to follow scholarly consensus: e.g. Jason Springs, *Toward a Generous Orthodoxy: Prospects for Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), 28; David Lee, *Luke's Stories of Jesus: Theological Reading of the Gospel Narrative and the Legacy of Hans Frei* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 28–29.

one reads the passion-resurrection sequences as realistic narratives whose meaning is one with their narrative descriptions. He suggests that reading these sequences on their own terms yields an ‘un-mythical’, history-like account of Jesus’ identity, and that this particular person—Jesus of Nazareth—is the meaning of the gospels, rather than a figure who points beyond himself to a deeper meaning. According to a reading of the gospels on their own terms, “[t]he place of the Christ figure” says Frei, “is preempted once and for all by Jesus of Nazareth”.⁸⁸ He labels this Jesus’ “unsubstitutability”, in contrast to what Higton calls the “repeatability” that characterises a mythical Christology.⁸⁹ The narrative ‘works’ in relation to this specific unsubstitutable person (the question of Jesus identity is “posed for us by the gospels themselves”)⁹⁰ and in answer to Frei’s initial question, the identity of Jesus dictates what it means to speak of him as present, rather than vice versa. Whatever Christians might want to say about Jesus—including how they might figurally understand themselves to be fulfilled by him—has to be articulated with regard to this unsubstitutability.

Secondly, the unsubstitutable identity of Jesus yielded in such a narrative reading transcends any kind of intellectual grasp, forcing a “scramble of our categories of understanding”,⁹¹ insofar as Jesus is narrated as the risen one whose identity is the manifestation of God’s activity towards the world. Despite the use of terms like ‘narrative reading’, Frei’s approach to Christology in no way binds Jesus to the narratives about him, but vice versa, binds the narratives to the particular person.⁹² The gospels, therefore, narrate Jesus’ transcendence.

⁸⁸ Frei, *Identity*, 123.

⁸⁹ Frei, *Identity*, 115, 123, 164. Higton, *Christ*, 96.

⁹⁰ Higton, *Christ*, 6.

⁹¹ Frei, ‘Remarks’, 32.

⁹² Rather than seeing Frei’s work as comprising a “narrative theology”, says Callahan, “[i]t is better to represent Frei’s work as a depiction of the convergence between the gospel narratives and their representation(s) of Jesus Christ, the identity of Christ being rendered at this point of intersection.” James Patrick Callahan, ‘The Convergence of Narrative and Christology: Hans W. Frei on the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ’, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (38, 1995), 532.

i) *Identity and presence*

The way Christians talk of Jesus as *present*, Frei says, presupposes his specific identity. In contrast to the Bultmannian notion of Jesus's presence to the community of believers being somehow 'embodied' in the kerygma about the cross and resurrection (a view that resembles Strauss' 'mythical' position)⁹³ Frei maintains that that any meaningful account of Jesus' presence to Christian believers and in the Christian church, must be prefigured by, and remain inseparable from, his historical particularity.⁹⁴ Frei highlights "a Christian belief that Jesus Christ is a contemporaneous person, here and now, just as he spans the ages,"⁹⁵ and argues that this kind of belief arises at one with a robust account of the identity of the one who is believed to be present—for otherwise this belief in his presence would be grounded in an abstract concept of presence *per se*, which is not really presence at all. Frei dismisses the question of *how* Jesus is present (i.e. how someone being present two thousand years after their execution 'fits' epistemologically) in favour of the question of *who* it is in whose presence Christians believe.

[I]f we begin with the often nagging and worrisome questions of *how* Christ is present to us and *how* we can believe in his presence, we shall get nowhere at all. It is far more important and fruitful to ask first, *Who* is Jesus Christ.⁹⁶

This identity-focussed approach to Jesus' presence avoids the category error outlined in *Eclipse*, neither dismissing the realistic narrative feature of the Gospels, nor abstracting Jesus' meaning from his person. Presence unattached to a specific identity is wholly un-history-like—you cannot meaningfully say 'Louis Armstrong is/isn't here' unless you have a sense of who he is. Abstracting Jesus's presence from his identity therefore affects the same kind of generalisation that occurs in the 'non-ostensive'/'mythical' hermeneutical approach described in *Eclipse*, where Jesus represents a fundamental meaning or potential of common humanity—where his

⁹³ E.g. Frei, 'Letter to Professor Ray L. Hart', 17.

⁹⁴ Frei saw in Bultmann the same epistemological monophysitism as he saw in Barth, although the two theologians embody this totally differently. "[I]n Bultmann's thought the revelatory event is merged into the existential response made to it." Frei, 'The Theology of Richard H. Niebuhr', 111.

⁹⁵ Frei, *Identity*, 74.

⁹⁶ Frei, *Identity*, 67.

particularity fades into the background behind the general religiousness he is supposed to embody.

In contrast to this generalising approach to Christology, Frei looks to the passion-resurrection accounts in the Gospels, arguing that the way Jesus' identity is described there is more like a realistic/historical novel than a mythical narrative. As he explained in a later essay, realistic novels depict "the plausibility of character and situation in their interaction precisely by means of the *singularity* or *unsubstitutability* of both,"⁹⁷ and in the passion-resurrection sequences in particular, Frei perceives the same coherence of unsubstitutable narrative and identity as regards Jesus. In these sequences, the person of Jesus gives the sequence its meaning and congruence, and therefore it is his identity that is the focus of the narrative, rather than his identity pointing to a meaning beyond itself, or to a more general question of how a person can be divine. The specific comparison with fictional description also allows Frei to highlight the way the union of unsubstitutable narrative and meaning does not have to imply a reduction to factuality *per se*. As he wrote in a paper delivered in Princeton in 1987,

To say 'like all good fictional description' is not to deny Jesus' historicity but to express great skepticism over the historian's—rather than the novelist's or the dramatist's—capacity to generate a *character* portrait of him in which concrete, non-idealized, unified particularity is all-encompassing universal human being at the same time.⁹⁸

The coherence of historical particularity with universality therefore goes beyond the territory of factuality as perceived in the enlightenment. There is something unique about the relationship between identity and presence when it comes to this person, Jesus of Nazareth. With any other historical figure one can think of an identity without presence: it makes sense, for example to say 'Louis Armstrong is not here', when we agree who we are talking about and therefore agree on his absence. An account of Jesus' identity derived from the Gospel narratives, however, makes talk of his presence uniquely necessary. To say 'Jesus is not here' somehow contradicts his

⁹⁷ Hans W. Frei, 'Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection', in Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 15. My italics.

⁹⁸ Hans W. Frei, 'The Encounter of Jesus with the German Academy', in Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1992), 135.

narrated identity as the crucified, risen and saving one. There is, says Frei, a “certain pattern in Jesus’ unique personal existence which provides the bond between the individuality of the Saviour and the cosmic scope of his activity.”⁹⁹ This pattern may sunder the normal relationship between historical people and ‘presence’ after their death, but, says Frei, there is no getting away from that pattern being at the heart of the gospel narratives. There is a coherence of historical particularity and transcendence, and Jesus ‘unsubstitutability’ carries both.

Therefore, by resisting the abstraction of Jesus presence from his identity, Frei’s concentration on ‘who’ rather than ‘how’ highlights the kind of theological posture that yields a nuanced account of Jesus’ transcendence. Where thinkers like Strauss close off the possibility of Jesus’ transcendence, Frei retains conceptual humility, because the specific history-like identity narrated in the gospels transcends epistemological categories. When Christian believers read the gospels on their own terms, “it is he who presents himself to us ... we do not have the capacity within ourselves to hold the unity of his identity with his presence in our minds. If he is effectively rendered to us in this unity when we think of him, it is due to his powerful goodness.”¹⁰⁰ In short, Frei’s prioritisation of ‘who’ as regards the identity of Jesus, is central to his relevance as a theologian of Jesus’ transcendence.

To ask about any other man, ‘*who* is he?’ does not bring him into the questioners spatial presence ... thinking of him does not constitute his presence. In the case of Jesus Christ, however, Christians claim that we cannot even think about him without his being present.¹⁰¹

ii) *Narrative reading*

With this clarification as regards presence and identity, Frei therefore turns to consider how the gospel narratives answer this ‘who’ question. He describes two ways of discerning how a narrative sequence yields a description of an identity without appealing to more general or universal categories behind the description itself. He is keen that any methods for discerning such identity description should be formal, not

⁹⁹ Frei, *Identity*, 116. See also Frei, *Identity*, 123.

¹⁰⁰ Frei, *Identity*, 76.

¹⁰¹ Frei, *Identity*, 75–76.

imposing exterior categories on the narrative itself—for then the text would not be approached on its own terms, and furthermore, such an imposition would slip back into asking about Jesus under a set of categories abstracted from his person. Rather, as Frei puts it in ‘Theological Reflections’, “[t]he proper approach is to keep the tools of interpretive analysis as minimal and formal as possible, so that the character(s) and the narrative of events may emerge in their own right.”¹⁰²

The two schemes of interrogating the text as regards the ‘*who*’ of Jesus, are what Frei calls ‘intention-action description’ and ‘self-manifestation’ (the latter, in ‘Theological Reflections’, rendered as ‘ascriptive subject description’ or ‘subject manifest in difference description’). Following the way Gilbert Ryle (1900–1976) had forcefully challenged another category error (Ryle’s term) in the philosophy of mind and body, both Frei’s schemes assume something Strauss maintained too—the union of inner and outer as regards a person’s identity. Ryle had challenged the Cartesian dualism which understood the mind as a totally ‘other’ element of a person than their body, located in inaccessible “insulated fields”.¹⁰³ Instead he proposed that a person’s “overt acts and utterances” are not to be understood as ‘effects’ of one’s mind (as if a thought/intention and an action can be distinguished and allocated to different parts of a person) but rather that intention and action are related in a continuum.¹⁰⁴ Frei therefore concentrates on the outer activity and manifestation of a person as an authentic means of being attentive to their whole character—specifically, in this case, the character of Jesus as narrated in the passion-resurrection sequences.¹⁰⁵

Frei is not reducing the complexity of the person of Jesus to only what he *did*, but is saying that the relationship between the two means that the latter is a meaningful way of describing the former. One cannot get to the bottom of Jesus’ identity by just looking at what he did; but at the same time, looking at what he did provides

¹⁰² Frei, ‘Theological’, 1.

¹⁰³ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson’s University Library, 1949), 13.

¹⁰⁴ Ryle, *Concept*, 25.

¹⁰⁵ This emphasis upon the union of inner and outer also relates to Frei’s reading of H. Richard Niebuhr regarding the identity of Jesus. Niebuhr, suggests Frei, also recognised that, “[t]he unity of the person of Jesus Christ is embedded in and immediately present to his teaching and practice. It is the focus of unity in the teaching and acts of the Lord.” Niebuhr avoided the suggestion either that Jesus’ personhood is simply not up for analysis, or that it is to be found in some historical discernment of his psychology as detached from his historical activities. Frei, ‘Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr’, 115.

meaningful insight into who he was. Frei, says Placher, “was aware of the attacks on Ryle as a crypto-behaviourist who denied the reality of any human interiority, and ... did not want to go that far, or indeed to tie himself to the details of any particular theory of personhood.”¹⁰⁶ Frei’s approach is therefore distinguished from anthropology, for “the interaction of ... inner and outer human being cannot be *explained*... But it can be *described*.”¹⁰⁷ Following Springs’ clarification that Frei “simply sought tools for *re-describing* the content of the gospel narratives in the light of their particular form”,¹⁰⁸ we therefore recognise that Frei is not denying any interiority *per se*, just that anything interior could be historically described except for in unity with the exterior. Activity and identity are not ontologically reducible to one another, but the gospel narratives give them together in such a way that we can describe identity via activity, even if that description cannot fully grasp the identity itself.¹⁰⁹ Again, in his essay on Niebuhr, Frei qualifies that this approach to Christology need not imply that a “series of acts of moral virtues in teaching and active exemplification exhausts the significance of a person’s being”, but,

Nevertheless, one can say that the being does not stand ineffably behind the series or the essence behind the phenomena, distinguished from them and only inferentially to be interpreted: rather, the being is concretely exhibited, embodied in the series of phenomena. Hence, the teaching and the acts of Jesus Christ, his moral virtues, are themselves the direct clue to his being.¹¹⁰

a) Intention-action description

Working under the assumption that the narratives of Jesus’ activity are a fitting description of his ‘whole’ person, not merely his ‘outer’ element, intention-action description is clearly an alternative to any search for ‘Jesus behind the text’, or what Frei in ‘Theological Reflections’ refers to as “subject-alienation description”, whereby “the significance of temporal, social events is ... said to be their subject reference

¹⁰⁶ Placher, ‘Introduction’, 12.

¹⁰⁷ Hans W. Frei, ‘Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal’, in Frei, *Theology and Narrative*, 35.

¹⁰⁸ Springs, ‘Toward’, 48.

¹⁰⁹ “One can, I think, describe the passage of intention into action ... and the unity and mutual dependence of intention and action without appealing to the ontological ground of that unity.” Frei, ‘Remarks’, 37.

¹¹⁰ Frei, ‘Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr’, 115.

rather than their public character.”¹¹¹ As Springs puts it, “the character’s actions do not *represent* his more essential identity. They embody his identity.”¹¹² Notably, Frei proposes one qualifier to Ryle’s account—namely because strict adherence to the latter’s scheme does not take into account events external to a person’s own enacted intention as somehow impinging upon and contributing to the formation of their identity. Thus, we should approach the history-like narratives with the assumption that an account of Jesus’ identity is “given in the mysterious coincidence of his intentional action with circumstances partly initiated by him, partly devolving upon him”.¹¹³

Frei focuses on three aspects of the passion-resurrection sequences that narrate a coherence of action and intention, and thereby yield a description of what Jesus is like: Jesus’s obedience; his power and powerlessness; and the identification of his intention and action with the intention and action of God.

Firstly, by obedience, Frei does not mean an isolated quality that constitutes Jesus’ abstract personality nor a quality of which Jesus might instantiate a good example, precisely because obedience cannot be abstracted from someone (God) or something (a mission) being obeyed. As obvious as this might seem, it serves as a subtle insistence that there is no meaning to Jesus’ obedience in abstraction from his historical particularity. The history-like narrative is not pointing away from itself to a more general quality that floats free of Jesus himself. Obedience, in other words, is not just ‘there’; it ‘happens’.

Although Jesus’ obedience to a God-given mission is recognisable from early on in the gospel narrative (e.g. from Jesus’ baptism to his identification with the one who is anointed and sent in Isaiah 61) Frei focusses in particular upon the passion-resurrection sequence (especially in Luke) because he believes it yields the kind of “sequence of cumulative, unbroken events” necessary to discern “a specific enactment of an intention”¹¹⁴—that is, the co-incidence of inner intention and outer action. The

¹¹¹ Frei, ‘Theological’, 24.

¹¹² Springs, *Toward*, 34.

¹¹³ Frei, *Identity*, 138.

¹¹⁴ Frei, *Identity*, 150.

passion-resurrection sequence is “literarily not of the type of a mythological tale. For surely in such tales, unsubstitutable personal identity developed in interaction with equally unsubstitutable transpiring does not constitute a significant theme.”¹¹⁵ Jesus’ obedience is described internally (in his prayer of submission to the will of his Father) and enacted outwardly (for example, in his refusal to call legions of angels to prevent his arrest) so that one can say his intention and action are inseparable.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, insofar as Jesus is spoken of as the Saviour, his being the one who saves is inseparable from this particular narrative of enacted intention of obedience.

The crucial transition point for the enactment of his obedience through the events is in the Garden and the subsequent arrest. Shortly before, in the upper room, he had spoken to his disciples of the cup they shared as the blood of the covenant, ‘poured out for many’ ... This is the content or aim of his obedience to God, enacted in the events climaxing the Gospel story. To be obedient to God was to pour out his blood in behalf of men. Who, then, was Jesus? He was what he did, the man completely obedient to God in enacting the good of men on their behalf.¹¹⁷

Secondly, Jesus’ enacted intentions witness to the unique and paradoxical relation between power and powerlessness that characterises his identity—a relation which includes both a paradoxical “coexistence” of power and powerlessness and also a “transition” from the one to the other.¹¹⁸ Jesus’ actions and words in the narrative point to his power in and over the circumstances where he is tried and executed, such that these events somehow constitute his obedience and enacted intention. In Placher’s words, here is an as “an odd inverse proportion”, for “the moment when it seems that Jesus can do nothing at all is the culmination of his work as savior of the world.”¹¹⁹ Frei highlights that Jesus’ corrupt trial witnesses to his identity as Messiah; that Jesus powerfully promises life in paradise as he dies as a condemned criminal; and that he is portrayed as having the initiative in ‘giving up his spirit’ to his Father. All these examples, says Frei, demonstrate how in his powerlessness on the way to the cross and on the cross, Jesus “is and remains powerful ... constraining all acts and

¹¹⁵ Frei, ‘Theological’, 15.

¹¹⁶ Frei, *Identity*, 151.

¹¹⁷ Frei, *Identity*, 152.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology and Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 15.

words, even those of his opponents, to testify to him.”¹²⁰ Furthermore, the realistic narrative of the enacted intentions of Jesus “show us a picture of the actual transition from power to helplessness ... held together through the experiences of the one undergoing it.” In other words, Jesus’ enacted intentions effect the transition from him being the one who willingly submits to his Father’s will in Gethsemane, to being the one apparently powerless on the cross. Frei puts it clearly in his ‘Theological Reflections’ essay, saying that “[t]he coexistence as well as the transition between power and powerlessness, of which we have spoken, are ordered by the single-minded intention of Jesus to enact the good of men on their behalf in obedience to God.”¹²¹

This paradoxical aspect of Jesus’ identity as the one Christians call Saviour cannot be abstracted from the narratives about him. Onlookers who see one able to save others but not himself, are in fact witnesses to the way Jesus’ obedient powerlessness is paradoxically central to his saving efficacy.¹²² The coherence of Jesus’ apparent failure to save with his actual saving work does not float freely as a ‘theme’ in the narrative: power and powerlessness are held together only by the enacted intention by which we know what Jesus is like.

Finally, as the narratives gather pace, Frei notes that a threefold coherence becomes apparent—that of the intentions and actions of Jesus, those of his captors and executioners, and those of God. That which is done to Jesus, and that which Jesus does, is more and more identified with God’s will and activity. For example, Jesus himself identifies Pilate’s ‘power’ over him as that which is bestowed by God.¹²³ Furthermore, “on the cross” says Frei, “the intention and action of Jesus are fully superseded by God’s”.¹²⁴ In the climactic resurrection narratives, where the meaning of the narrative coheres wholly around the unsubstitutable identity of Jesus, the one who is risen, the resurrection itself is *God’s* mysterious action. God raises Jesus from the dead. Yet—and here is the essential feature of the narrative—“although God and God alone is the agent of the resurrection, it is not God but Jesus who appears”.¹²⁵

¹²⁰ Frei, *Identity*, p.153.

¹²¹ Frei, ‘Theological Reflections’, 6.

¹²² Frei, *Identity*, 155.

¹²³ John 19:11.

¹²⁴ Frei, *Identity*, 158.

¹²⁵ Frei, *Identity*, 162.

The enacted intentions of God are at one in the narrative with the historically particular figure of Jesus.

The resurrection of Jesus therefore implies the coherence of his history-like identity with the identity of God in God's activity towards and in the world (i.e. to recall Anderson's emphasis, God's transcendence). However, Frei notices the relatively diminished capacity of intention-action description at this point in the narrative, due to the mysterious character of resurrection. Not only is Jesus' resurrection not his own action; but that action is not narrated at all. As Hauerwas notes, there are no narratives of the resurrection, only of Jesus the risen one.¹²⁶ To put it another way, in the resurrection narratives it becomes much more difficult to say exactly *what* happened, but the narratives are clearly focusing upon *who* is manifest through whatever happened, and understand the happening only with reference to that *who*. Therefore, from this point onwards, Frei suggests that the way the narrative sequence renders Jesus' identity is better drawn out by his second scheme of 'subject-' or 'self-manifestation' description.

b) Self-manifestation description

Self-manifestation description rests on the same Ryle-ian rejection of an inner/outer dichotomy as does intention-action description. However, rather than describing how a person's action is a meaningful way of getting at what they are like, Frei is concerned with how a person's word and body—those things according to which they are manifest as an 'I'—are meaningful ways of getting at the continuity of *who* they are in the history-like narrative. Although the 'I' remains elusive to a degree,¹²⁷ Frei nevertheless suggests that there are times when a person's speech is "literally his embodiment"; and that, whilst we often say 'my body', "the body is not merely a possession, but the intimate *manifestation* of myself".¹²⁸ Speech and body are sufficiently meaningful for describing who a person is, and therefore neither speech nor body need be alienated from someone's identity. Furthermore, a person's name also refers

¹²⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (London: SCM, 2006), 246.

¹²⁷ Frei acknowledges Kant's insight as seminal here, insofar as description of my 'I' is not independent of the performance of my 'I' upon it, and thus my 'I' can never be examined in isolation from itself. Frei, 'Theological', 20.

¹²⁸ Frei, *Identity*, 140.

not to a meaning in alienation from who they are, but to their persistent existence as known by others according to how they manifest themselves.¹²⁹ We can meaningfully refer, then, to name, body and speech to describe who a person is. Self-manifestation description is therefore about how Jesus' name, body and speech function in the history-like narrative as descriptions of his identity.

However, Frei is markedly slippery on the way he actually employs self-manifestation description. Higton points out how Frei's own practice of applying this self-manifestation scheme is at times obliquely related to the kind of scheme he describes, insofar as he concentrates less on how Jesus' name, words and body generally testify to his continual identity, and more specifically on the way meanings and symbols—such as Son of God, Messiah, Kingdom of God—become inseparably identified with that particular name, words and body, and therefore with Jesus' identity.

Frei's self-manifestation description turns out to be about how specifications of Jesus' true identity are, in the Gospels, linked to his particularity: how they are deployed in such a way as to become manifestations of his identity rather than impositions upon it ... Christ's identification in the resurrection accounts has to do precisely with ... the identity of a person with his or her flesh, the identity a person finds bestowed and revealed in a name, and the demonstration that a person can now be properly identified through descriptions hitherto generalized and external.¹³⁰

In other words, in identifying these “hitherto generalized and external descriptions” with Jesus' name, utterance and flesh, the resurrection narrative renders his identity. Frei contrasts this with the nativity and ministry narratives. The nativity stories identify Jesus primarily in terms of the broader story of the people of Israel, especially in those aspects of the narrative that Matthew describes as happening to fulfill the prophets—e.g. the flight to Egypt. There, Jesus is identified “by means of the crucial turns in the people's past ... converging on him at once and identifying who he is because of all that he embodies.”¹³¹ From his baptism throughout the stories of his ministry, Jesus appears as more distinctly individual than in the nativity and infancy narratives, but even so continues to function somewhat symbolically as regards titular

¹²⁹ Frei, ‘Theological’, 24.

¹³⁰ Higton, *Christ*, 106.

¹³¹ Frei, *Identity*, 167.

references (like ‘Son of God’, or ‘Lord’) that in turn identify him with the theme of the Kingdom of God. Frei thinks, for example, of the way Jesus answers the disciples of John who enquire of his identity by pointing to the signs of the Kingdom that surround his ministry. Here, in comparison to the nativity, “Jesus becomes more nearly an individual in his own right, and yet his identity is established by reference to the Kingdom of God.”¹³²

The resurrection story is even more different, however. Turning Bultmann’s terminology on its head, Frei says that in the resurrection story, the unsubstitutable figure of Jesus is the one who ‘demythologises’ the pattern of references to do with the Kingdom of God, messiah-ship, the Son of Man, the Saviour, and suchlike.¹³³ “Jesus identifies the titles rather than they him.”¹³⁴ Frei takes the phrase in Luke’s Emmaus narrative (that Jesus “interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning him”)¹³⁵ as a paradigmatic description of how previously ambiguously referencing titles are now particularised and clarified in their reference to Jesus who *was* crucified and *is* risen. In place of titles or themes, the narratives of Jesus’ body, speech and name now meaningfully manifest *his* particular unsubstitutable identity—an identity which defines the titles rather than vice versa. No longer can the titles refer to anything beyond Jesus himself. The theological upshot of this is that Jesus’ historicity is indispensable for understanding his cosmic significance—i.e. his significance not only as “the Christ of Israel”¹³⁶ but also as the one in whom all things consist, and in whose death and resurrection God reconciles the world to Godself.¹³⁷

Of course, ‘history-like’ and ‘risen’ do not naturally cohere in the way we understand and experience the world, and the consequence of Frei’s narrative reading is in direct conflict with the modern perception of an impasse between faith and history. Frei, however, undercuts that impasse with an Anselmian Christological ontology. In a similar way to Anselm’s proposal that God cannot be meaningfully thought of as not existing, Frei says that although one cannot describe quite what it is for Jesus to be

¹³² Frei, *Identity*, 168

¹³³ Frei, *Identity*, 171; Frei, ‘Theological’, 32.

¹³⁴ Frei, *Identity*, 172.

¹³⁵ Luke 24:26–27.

¹³⁶ Frei, *Identity*, 172.

¹³⁷ Colossians 1:17, 20.

raised, one cannot think of Jesus as ‘not-raised’.¹³⁸ A description of Jesus as not raised would simply not be a description of the Jesus narrated in the gospels, for there his resurrection is an irreducible aspect of his identity. The risen one *is* Jesus—that is how the history-like text identifies him. Resurrection is not an added extra, a kind of ‘bonus feature’ for those who want to believe that kind of thing. Unlike the way in which eighteenth and nineteenth century hermeneutics abstracted meaning and factuality from the texts themselves, subjecting the text to the ‘fact question’ behind the text itself, here factuality arises at one with the narrative texts. Here history-likeness and the question of historicity arrive together. As Frei makes clear in a recently published letter to Leander Keck, the resurrection narrative *is* a point at which history-likeness and the question of historical factuality cohere—most obviously in the fact that theologians and historians would agree that the resurrection is the kind of thing that could be falsified (by finding Jesus’ body) even if it cannot be reduced to factual truth.¹³⁹ The narrative that Jesus is raised therefore dictates or encompasses the question of factuality, even though we do not know wholly what that means. In another letter, Frei says “what these stories *refer to* or *how* they refer remains a philosophical puzzle, but it has to be in a way congruent with their realistic, history-like character.”¹⁴⁰ Jesus as narrated in the gospels can only be thought of as factually resurrected.¹⁴¹

Barth describes how Anselm’s ‘proof’ operates “in such a way that the object which it describes emerges as something completely independent of when men in actual fact conceive it or can conceive it”,¹⁴² and along the same logic, when asking ‘did the resurrection really happen?’ Frei emphasises that one can only dictate the negative (he is not not-raised) rather than the positive. “It is, rather, that, however impossible it

¹³⁸ Frei, *Identity*, 179; Anselm, *Proslogion*, 7–8. “Do I really need to point out the parallel between this procedure and Anselm’s argument in the *Proslogion* that God’s existence is necessarily implied in the proper definition of the concept ‘God?’” Hans W. Frei, ‘Historical Reference and the Gospels’, in Frei, *Reading Faithfully*, 97.

¹³⁹ Hans W. Frei, ‘Letter to Leander Keck, May 22, 1975’, in Frei, *Reading Faithfully*, 12.

¹⁴⁰ Hans W. Frei, ‘Letter to Gary Comstock, November 5, 1984’, in Frei, *Reading Faithfully*, 40.

¹⁴¹ “Our argument is that to grasp what this identity, Jesus of Nazareth (which has been made directly accessible to us) is to believe that he has, in *fact*, been raised from the dead ... He is the resurrection and the life. How can he be conceived as not resurrected?” Frei, *Identity*, 179.

¹⁴² Barth, *Anselm*, 74.

may be to grasp the nature of the resurrection, it remains inconceivable that it should not have taken place.”¹⁴³

Frei clarifies this point even more in a response to C. F. H. Henry’s critique of his reference to truth, saying that whilst he was not denying the factuality of the resurrection, he remains unconvinced that a general category of ‘factuality’ can be used to speak of its ‘truth’ at all.

If I am asked to use the language of factuality, then I would say, yes, in those terms, I have to speak of an empty tomb. In those terms I have to speak of a literal resurrection. But I think those terms are not privileged, theory-neutral, trans-cultural, an ingredient in the structure of the human mind and of reality always and everywhere for me, as I think they are for Dr. Henry.¹⁴⁴

This is not because the resurrection is something other than factual (the “falsifiability” of it means that it is that at the very least)¹⁴⁵ but because it is something *more*—something in relation to which categorisation (in this case, under the term ‘factuality’) is inappropriate. To put it another way, if one were to think that by establishing the factuality of the resurrection according to categories of historical criticism and rational ‘evidence’, one had therefore defined and proved it, then one would not be talking about the resurrection of Jesus. According to Anselm, God cannot be thought of as not existing; in Frei’s intention-action scheme of identity description, Jesus cannot be thought of as not raised.

Frei has followed a rationale of exploring the gospel texts as history like texts that narrate the identity of Jesus of Nazareth, such that their meaning cannot be found in abstraction from him. Frei’s focus on historicity therefore yields anything but a domesticated Jesus, whose historical identity and activity remains within the boundaries of the enlightenment’s delimited rationality. Instead, the activity of Jesus as the one in whom the wholly other God is acting can only be described as regards historical particularity. Thus Frei’s work reflects that to which Anderson directs our

¹⁴³ Frei, *Identity*, 179.

¹⁴⁴ Hans W. Frei, ‘Response to ‘Narrative Theology: an Evangelical Criticism’, in Frei, *Theology and Narrative*, 211.

¹⁴⁵ Frei, ‘Letter to Leander Keck’, 12.

attention—that a proper account of Jesus’ transcendence directs us towards, not away from, history.

iii) *Transcendence, presence and the Spirit*

The risen Jesus transcends categories of historical criticism as history-like and as non-mythical. A history-like description of Jesus forces statements beyond the explanatory powers of historical criticism or philosophical concepts (he is what God is doing; he is risen from the dead). By virtue of the coherence of Jesus’ historical activity with the activity of God, and the way the resurrection is the focal point of who Jesus is in the narratives, a reading of the passion-resurrection sequence that recognises the unity of narrative and meaning also recognises that precisely as historical, Jesus transcends. Christian ‘faith seeking understanding’ has no option but to articulate the transcendence of Jesus at the level of realistic narrative, his historical particularity being mysteriously coherent with the kind of divine activity in which Christians believe. As Frei later put it, “ordinary language and ordinary work or political or household experience is sufficient for the utterly odd, the disproportionate, the transcendent, the Kingdom of God, to be rendered verbally and proclaimed.”¹⁴⁶

The question of Jesus’ presence, which Frei determinedly subordinates at the outset of *Identity*, now becomes answerable in a specifically descriptive way, for Jesus’ identity as the risen one is what necessitates talk of his presence. In the same way that Jesus cannot be thought of as not-raised, he cannot be thought of as not-present. Precisely because he can only be thought of as the one “raised from the dead and manifest to be the redeemer”, says Frei, “he cannot *not* live. By virtue of his identity as the risen one, he ‘constrains’ the imagination to acknowledge him as present.”¹⁴⁷

Of course, this is not the way people are usually present to us. In a welcome step into pneumatology, Frei describes how Christians refer to the Holy Spirit to describe Jesus’ contemporaneous presence. Pentecost describes how, by virtue of the gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus the risen one is present with his disciples as the presence of God.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Frei, ‘Response’, 209.

¹⁴⁷ Frei, *Identity*, 182.

¹⁴⁸ Frei, *Identity*, 186.

Insofar as his presence is only meaningful as rendered in the realistic narratives about him, such contemporaneous presence by the Spirit, though different from a normal bodily presence in time and space, is nevertheless specific, not generalised, and in continuity with the history-like narratives.¹⁴⁹ The Spirit also calls forth a response to the presence of Jesus, embodied in love and commitment to him and to one's neighbor. Finally pneumatological language is employed to speak of the "public and communal form" of Christ's presence through the church to the world, which is constituted by the Holy Spirit.¹⁵⁰

Nevertheless, this is anything but straightforward:

In the New Testament, this indirectness both of Christ's presence and of our grasp of it as mysterious, self-focussed presence is expressed in the stress ... on that fact that Jesus had to withdraw from men before the Spirit would be bestowed on the community of believers. Yet that bestowal, after this withdrawal, is nonetheless no other presence than that of Jesus Christ, a fact that believers find confirmed in the gifts of Word and Sacrament—the spatial and temporal bases of the presence of Jesus Christ.¹⁵¹

Concerning the coherence between historicity and transcendence, Frei highlights that Jesus' unsubstitutable presence by the Spirit is a presence experienced in 'indirectness', both in terms of his absence, and of Word and Sacrament, themselves gifts and works of the Spirit.¹⁵² The narratives that culminate in the promise and the gift of the Holy Spirit do not envisage a sudden generalisation of Jesus' identity, as if his name no longer refers to his specificity and particularity. Rather, it is precisely that specific identity that is given to the historical church, yet in such a way that stretches the 'normal' limits of spatio-temporal presence. In Frei's theology, the transcendence of Jesus (his being divinely present beyond the limits of time and space) and the historicity of Jesus (his history-like identity) are viewed as one, ministered to Christians by the Spirit. The coherence of historicity and transcendence is not limited to reflections upon what is usually referred to as Jesus' 'earthly life'. It applies just as

¹⁴⁹ Frei, *Identity*, 187. Elsewhere Frei writes, "In his eternal rule Jesus Christ maintains that solidarity with us that he established in the days of his flesh." Hans W. Frei, 'Of The Resurrection of Christ', in Frei, *Theology and Narrative*, 206.

¹⁵⁰ Frei, *Identity*, 188–189.

¹⁵¹ Frei, *Identity*, 187.

¹⁵² Frei, *Identity*, 194.

forcefully to all Christian relationship to him. Frei counters the domesticating aspect of modernist Christology—especially that of Culture Protestantism—in such a way that Jesus does not collapse into a universal ‘meaning’, but remains a particular transcendent person, even in the practice of figural reading. To counter the domestication of transcendence in terms of Christology, then, is to insist as forcefully as possible upon the historical particularity of Jesus as a crucial aspect of relationship to God in Christ by the Spirit.

Frei’s introduction of pneumatology at this point (albeit an “abrupt” one)¹⁵³ strengthens his work considerably, but the extent to which the work of the Spirit is highlighted at this point casts into relief the extent to which the Spirit was *not* spoken of earlier. As Higton argues in an appendix to *Christ, Providence and History*, Frei does not collapse pneumatology into the discussion about the identity of Christ, but seeks to articulate how “Christian pneumatological claims ... are indirectly supported and directly shaped by the Gospel’s depictions of Jesus’ identity.”¹⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the lack of focus upon the Spirit as active from the incarnation through the whole ministry of Jesus is fairly ironic given Frei’s own explicit attention to Luke’s Gospel—itself rich in references to the Spirit’s activity from the conception of John the Baptist onwards.¹⁵⁵ Whilst the Pentecost narrative in Acts (of one authorship with Luke’s Gospel) describes a powerful new relationship with God the Holy Spirit, it should not be disconnected from the Luke’s narratives of the Spirit’s work from the conception of John and Jesus, and beyond. The one *who* is given at Pentecost—albeit in new relational terms—is the one whose activity characterises the way Luke tells the story of Jesus. Furthermore, as we shall consider again in the next chapter, the hermeneutical practice of figural reading requires a pneumatological dimension to account for the inspiration that Christians understand to be at play as they recognise, in their texts and in the ‘texts’ of their own lives, the pattern of God the Father revealed in Christ.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Higton, *Christ*, 228.

¹⁵⁴ Higton, *Christ*, 227.

¹⁵⁵ E.g. Luke 1:15, 35, 41, 67. See Higton, *Christ*, 229–230.

¹⁵⁶ “Through the Spirit, Jesus becomes the phrase or word in which the Father is given to the believer and the believer to the Father”. Loughlin, *Telling*, 189.

A further irony is that Frei does not speak of the personal identity of the Spirit, despite having the conceptual tools with which to do so given his inquiry into the modes of identity description when it comes to Jesus in the Gospels. Eugene F. Rogers' work fills in this gap by taking hold of Frei's own methodology as regards Jesus' identity and applying a similar mode of inquiry to pneumatology. Recognising a disconnect in Western theology between the Spirit and the historically particular—especially as far as *body* is concerned—Rogers proposes that attention be paid to “how the Spirit interacts with plot and circumstance in the Gospels”, and how the Spirit is specifically identified “in her interactions with Jesus”, specifically with Jesus' body.¹⁵⁷ Emphasising the particularity of the Spirit in terms of her interactions with Jesus in the narrative does not make for Christomonism (i.e. a reduction of the pneumatological to the Christological) but rather emphasises Trinitarian indivisibility—i.e. that the Son and the Spirit act together.¹⁵⁸

Because the acts of the Trinity towards the world are indivisible, the only time one could distinguish the Spirit from the Son would be when the narratives give glimpses of their *intratrinitarian* interaction. That means that ... the only interaction of the Spirit with plot and circumstance that could *distinguish* the Spirit from the Son, will be the Spirit's interactions *with* the Son ... Narratively, the Spirit is identified in her interactions with Jesus, and is so neither identical with him, nor apart from him: doctrinally, the Spirit alights, abides, or comes to rest on the Son.¹⁵⁹

It is important to highlight that the particular narratives about Jesus are often also pneumatological narratives. For one thing, it prevents talk of the Spirit being very much after-the-fact when it comes to the life of Jesus; and furthermore, it emphasises from within the narratives themselves that the ministry of the Holy Spirit to the church is indivisible from God's work in Christ. Finally, following David Kelsey's determination to put Frei's work to use in a more explicitly Trinitarian context, this

¹⁵⁷ Eugene F. Rogers, *After the Spirit: A Constructive Pneumatology from Resources Outside the Modern West* (London: SCM, 2006), 7.

¹⁵⁸ Rogers, *After*, p.9. See also Anderson, “the transcendent grounds for the testimony of the Spirit was the historical life of Jesus”. Anderson, *Historical*, 213.

¹⁵⁹ Rogers, *After*, 7. David Kelsey similarly describes, though in less detail than Rogers, how “the Spirit's circumambience in history is tied closely to the concrete particularity of Jesus' life, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection from the dead.” David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology, vol 1*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 451.

kind of emphasis allows for a more openly articulated Trinitarian reflection grounded in the historical particularity of the Father's sending of the Son and the Spirit.¹⁶⁰

Furthermore, if the work of the Spirit is not merely posterior to Christ's activity, but is in union with God's work in Christ, then the Spirit is also anterior to Christian faith in Jesus. This becomes apparent when we recognise that the Spirit is not only the one whose work Christians confess by virtue of their faith that Jesus is risen, but is also the one who makes for the initial faith that Jesus 'cannot not be raised'. Frei states that Jesus can only be thought of as raised in the context of an already existent *fides quaerens intellectum*,¹⁶¹ and that already existent, already *given* faith is the work of the Holy Spirit who enables confession of the risen Jesus as Lord.¹⁶² The Spirit, as Loughlin puts it, is "the bringer of the Son to the people, and the bringer of the people to the Son."¹⁶³ What in chapter 2 we called a 'confessional context' is therefore also a *pneumatological* context. This observation, derived from the shape of Frei's own theology, helps to waylay any tendency to utterly subordinate pneumatology to Christology. Faith in the unsubstitutability of Jesus, and the presence of this Jesus with us now, are both the work of God the Holy Spirit. As we progress to a fuller articulation of the transcendence of Jesus, this emphasis will be important.

IV

Conclusion

i) Summary

The identity of Jesus is not "dissolved into *our* identity or presence".¹⁶⁴ Jesus as narrated in the gospel narratives remains the wholly other one, whose identity coincides with God's, and thus even as the historical one remains the transcendent one who is present with us by the Spirit. Jesus "withdraw[s] from our grasp and

¹⁶⁰ Kelsey, *Eccentric*, vol 1., 442–446.

¹⁶¹ Recall Barth's notion of divine *donare* and *illuminare*. Barth, *Anselm*, 170–171.

¹⁶² 1 Corinthians 12:3.

¹⁶³ Loughlin, *Telling*, 193.

¹⁶⁴ Frei, *Identity*, 182.

turn[s] to us from his own presence”.¹⁶⁵ Frei maintains Barth’s emphasis on the wholly-other-ness of God without implying epistemological monophysitism, and in doing so points towards how a Christology focussed upon Jesus’ particularity can give rise to a posture of humility based precisely on what it *does* proclaim—i.e. the identity of Jesus as the one who is crucified and risen.

Two key building blocks in Frei’s contribution to an account of Jesus’ transcendence have now become clear. Firstly, he witnesses to a rationale for faith and history that refuses the category error outlined in *Eclipse*. As Higton explains, the “unprecedented and unparalleled” happenings at the heart of the Christian faith take place precisely as historical, for “what takes place in Jesus takes place in the world of contingency and complexity, of actions and interactions, of characters and circumstances”.¹⁶⁶ God’s activity in Jesus Christ is historical, but it is “a miracle within history”, meaning that “history is freed from the intolerable burden of somehow being *naturally* the home of the absolute, and so is allowed to be itself again.”¹⁶⁷ In losing its post-enlightenment status as guarantor of ‘factual truth’, history gains its status as the receptor of gracious divine activity. According to Frei’s logic then, that which is beyond the explanatory power of historical *Wissenschaft*, nevertheless has to be described in those historical terms, because those are the only terms fit for what is being described (Jesus as the one in whom God acts in and towards the world) even though those terms cannot contain what they describe.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ Frei, *Identity*, 114.

¹⁶⁶ Higton, *Christ*, 117.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Therefore, Francesca Murphy’s criticism that Frei has a fundamentally non-realistic hermeneutic whereby God ‘exists’ only in relation to the texts about God, seems over simplistic. Murphy posits something similar to a behaviorist critique leveled at Frei’s affinity with Ryle, namely that “known in his *doing*, Frei’s Christ is not so much an actor as an action”. Francesca Aran Murphy, *God is Not a Story: Realism Revisited* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 93. Her objection is that Frei “entails either that the storytelling itself becomes the foundation upon which God stands, or else that the story itself is the wider conception which contains the idea of God.” Murphy, ‘God’, 65. However, if Frei is claiming that the identity described in the history-like narratives somehow scrambles the categories of history-like description so that Jesus recasts in his own light the meaning of identity in the world, then Murphy’s critique will not stick. In other words, Frei is arguing that we cannot access Jesus’ identity in isolation from the narratives about him, but not implying that such description places the identity so described—i.e. the ‘*who*’—at the disposal of the hermeneutical or narrative ‘method’. See William C. Placher, ‘Review of Francesca A. Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, *Modern Theology* (24, 2008), 512–513, and also Loughlin’s outline and dismissal of Mark Wallace’s similar critique of Frei. Loughlin, *Telling*, 156–158.

Secondly, *Identity* evidences how Jesus' specific transcendence coheres with this approach to history as the locus of divine activity. The history-like unsubstitutability of the stories about Jesus are *the* way to speak of him as beyond us. As Schwartzentruber says, Frei's formal schemes for identity description allow for the person of Jesus to disrupt the categories of historical enquiry, exhibiting a "hermeneutical modesty [that] is theologically substantive".¹⁶⁹ Frei's schemes exhibit the "modesty of description rather than explanation",¹⁷⁰ and therefore witness to a theology of the transcendence of Jesus by their formal *incapacity*. In other words, the conceptual "scramble"¹⁷¹ that arises from the description of Jesus' identity (e.g. that Jesus is the risen one) is to be understood as part of the theological point—that according to the meaningful descriptions of his particular history-likeness, Jesus transcends the world as the risen one. "The climax of the Gospel story is the full unity of the unsubstitutable individuality of Jesus with the presence of God."¹⁷²

In summary, then, Frei's response to the category error of eighteenth and nineteenth century hermeneutics yields a Christological rationale for the relationship between faith and history that in turn enables a positive assessment of what it means to say that Jesus is transcendent. Jesus' transcendence is particular, for he transcends as the one who proceeds from the Father, who enacts the good of humanity on its behalf, is raised from the dead and is present to the church now, drawing that church into his likeness.

Sonderegger is right, then, that Frei's Christology is characterised by an "orthodox monophysitism"¹⁷³—a determined emphasis on oneness as regards inner and outer, historical and transcendent.

Here at last, in this one mysterious event, history and inwardness are one; exterior and interior are one; the Christ outside us and the Christ inside us are one: but one as Christ's own unique possession. He holds and maintains his own identity—his Lordship—and turns toward us to endow us with his own

¹⁶⁹ Paul Schwartzentruber, 'The Modesty of Hermeneutics: The Theological Reserves of Hans Frei', *Modern Theology* (8, 1992), 192.

¹⁷⁰ Schwartzentruber, 'The Modesty', 183.

¹⁷¹ Frei, 'Remarks', 32.

¹⁷² Frei, *Identity*, 186.

¹⁷³ Sonderegger, 'Epistemological', 260.

life. Out of two natures, one: but the One that simply is Jesus Christ, the living Lord.¹⁷⁴

In choosing the phrase “orthodox monophysitism”,¹⁷⁵ Sonderegger highlights how Frei’s corrective of Barth does not emphasise the historicity of Jesus as a separate aspect of God’s revelation, but sees that historicity as given in and with the act of God towards the world in which God is wholly other. Through his tightly focussed critique of post-enlightenment hermeneutics, Frei’s negotiation of the question of faith and history by prioritising the narrative sense of scripture prevents an over-emphasis on the distinctness of the two natures of Christ, which though distinct can never be examined independently.

Furthermore, the way in which Frei’s conceptually modest investigation yields such an orthodox point emphasises the concurrence of a particular Christology of the transcendence of Jesus with Christian modesty. To put it another way, particularity and doctrinal specificity in Christology make for conceptual humility. An account of the transcendence of Jesus therefore draws together elements of Frei’s work that make for his promise as a theologian who guides us in avoiding both the extremes of arrogance and banality.

ii) *Looking onwards: paying attention to the community*

Frei’s conclusion to *Identity* not only recognises a pneumatological but also an ecclesiological dimension, in that it is to the church that Jesus is present by the Spirit, and by the church the Lordship of Jesus is manifest to the world in a special way. Like Jesus himself, the church cannot be understood in a de-particularised vacuum, but is itself constituted “through the engagement of character and circumstance, and given in the narratives of that engagement.”¹⁷⁶ Being a community with the Word and sacrament at its heart, the church structures its life according to the Biblical narratives (Word) that witness to the identification of Jesus with God; and according to the sacraments which are “the self-communication in physical form of one who is self-

¹⁷⁴ Sonderegger, ‘Epistemological’, 262.

¹⁷⁵ Sonderegger, ‘Epistemological’, 260.

¹⁷⁶ Loughlin, *Telling*, 85.

focussed to us who cannot know self-focussed presence except in physical form”.¹⁷⁷ The church is the context—the living community—in which faith that seeks understanding is grounded, articulated and developed, and therefore the locus of the anterior rationale for the kind of narrative reading that Frei proposes. The church, in short, is where this kind of reading makes sense.

Furthermore, Frei recognises that the nature of the church’s confession of Jesus does not pan out into certainty as regards its future, or indeed the future completion of the world in Christ. The church’s own identity, as a “collective disciple” patterned after Jesus himself yet non-identical with him, is unfinished, and involves “an inevitable appeal to the undisclosed future”.¹⁷⁸ Granted, the church understands its own identity, and indeed the progression of world history, figurally in relation to the identity of Christ, but this understanding operates as a “token and a pledge” of the summing up of all things in Christ, not as an “ideological clue to what must happen.”¹⁷⁹ Figural reading as regards the church’s own identity in Christ, like narrative reading as regards Jesus’ identity, implies a posture of epistemological—and also political—humility.

Frei articulated the centrality of the interpreting community in much greater detail in his later work, particularly focusing on the community’s role in shaping its own ‘normative’ reading of scripture—i.e. the ‘literal’, realistic narrative approach and concomitant figural understanding. Therefore, the next chapter examines how Frei’s attention to the cultural-linguistic character of the church community, especially concerning scripture, continues to evidence the openness in his theology that makes for his promise as a theologian of Jesus’ transcendence. We will pay attention to how Frei’s understanding of the sociological nexus between believing community and text points to the way in which Christian theology employs philosophical and historical-critical tools in an open-ended and revisable fashion, on account of its witness to divine activity within finite history. At the heart of that open-ended and revisable approach is what I shall refer to as the ‘hermeneutical normativity’ of the transcendent and particular person of Jesus.

¹⁷⁷ Frei, *Identity*, 194.

¹⁷⁸ Frei, *Identity*, 191.

¹⁷⁹ Frei, *Identity*, 193.

Chapter 4.

HANS FREI: JESUS, TRANSCENDENCE, AND THE HERMENEUTICAL COMMUNITY

Later in his career—particularly in two essays in the early 1980s—Frei articulated his insistence upon the unity of narrative and meaning within a more explicitly cultural-linguistic, and consequently ecclesiological, account of Christian hermeneutics and theology. In doing so, he highlights that a ‘narrative reading’ of the Biblical text needs to be understood as the praxis of a faith community rather than an abstract theory. He therefore grounds a hermeneutical ‘normativity’ of the specific identity of Jesus in the complex, social and non-reducible praxis of the church, rather than in a theory of ‘narrativity’ *per se*. In other words, the unsubstitutable identity of Jesus is understood to be the normative meaning of the narratives about him not only because of a property of the text, but also because of a complex coherence between the community’s confessional use of the narrative texts about Jesus, and the way those texts seem to lend themselves to such use. As a result, the historically particular identity of Jesus, which transcends the domesticating categories of post-enlightenment general theory, norms how Christians read the Bible and also how they understand their own lives—this latter aspect being the practice of what Frei referred to in *Eclipse* as typological or figural reading.

This chapter explains how Frei’s focus on hermeneutical praxis re-emphasises the particularity of Jesus over and against the generalising tendency of Culture Protestantism, and also points towards another dimension of historical particularity in the discussion of Jesus’ transcendence—i.e. the historically particular community in relation with Jesus now. In addition, taking cues from contemporary attention to the relationship between the apostles and scripture in Frei’s work, I will also draw on Richard Bauckham’s exploration of the gospels as testimony, and use that to supplement Frei’s content as regards the community from which scripture arises. As in chapter 3, I will also suggest that a reading of Frei’s work benefits from more explicit pneumatology, especially regarding the way the community is normed by Jesus Christ.

Finally, we look to *Types of Christian Theology* to see how Frei's work gives us a vision of an abiding flexibility and conceptual humility in Christian theology, grounded not upon the priority of philosophical or historical-critical disciplines, but upon Jesus Christ who is both transcendent and particular. Again, Frei makes this observation via reflection upon how the particular hermeneutical praxis of the Christian community relates to and interacts with 'external' disciplines such as philosophy and historical criticism. Jesus' particular transcendent identity 'norms' the way theology draws upon and utilises these other disciplines in an *ad hoc* fashion, for its own development and self-critique. It becomes clear, therefore, that a conceptually humble Christian theology is the response to an orthodox account of, and relationship with, Jesus who is transcendent in his particularity.

Recent scholarship argues that Frei's later cultural-linguistic focus should not simply be construed as a novel or divergent aspect of his thought, as if a shift in perspective required him to jettison his earlier approach.¹ Mike Higton uses structural imagery, suggesting that any development actually constitutes "more of a change to the scaffolding surrounding Frei's Christological proposal than a change in its most important details", insofar as Frei became more attentive to the social and ecclesiological factors that supported his argument for the centrality of a high Christology.² Jason Springs, too, argues that Frei's work should simply be interpreted as having a "developmental trajectory", rather than a break.³ Frei's later writings, argues Springs, build upon the central aspects of his earlier hermeneutical work, insofar as the later cultural-linguistic descriptions of Christianity's approach to the relationship between text and meaning "presuppose" the "subject matter" of *Identity*—i.e. "the unity of narrative form and Christological content of the gospel accounts of Christ's death and resurrection."⁴ Furthermore, Springs points out that the insights

¹ E.g. David Lee, *Luke's Stories of Jesus: Theological Reading of the Gospel Narrative and the Legacy of Hans Frei* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 30. Dan R. Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol and Story* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 144.

² Mike Higton, *Christ, Providence and History: Hans Frei's Public Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 178. See also Mike Higton, 'Hans Frei and David Tracy on the Ordinary and the Extraordinary in Christianity', *The Journal of Religion* (79, 1999), 572–573.

³ Jason A. Springs, *Toward a Generous Orthodoxy: Prospects for Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), 44.

⁴ Springs, *Toward*, 45. Note also Ben Fulford on the continuity of the "procedure" of 'faith seeking understanding' in Frei's earlier and later work. Ben Fulford, *Divine Eloquence and Human Transformation: Rethinking Scripture and History through Gregory of Nazianzus and Hans Frei* (Fortress: Minneapolis, 2013), 234.

explicit in Frei's later Wittgensteinian methods are implicit in his deployment of Ryle's model of the unity between inner and outer as regards character manifestation.⁵ I therefore read Frei's attention to the cultural-linguistic and social-scientific dimensions of theology as a fleshing out of centrality of the transcendent Christ for Christian theology—i.e. the centrality of the salient Christological point drawn from *Eclipse* and *Identity* in the previous chapter. There is manifest development and 'thickening' in Frei's later work, but as Fulford notes, the development of fresh categories of formal enquiry into how Christians practice their hermeneutics, should not obscure "the insight in whose service those categories are invoked, namely that the texts render the unsubstitutable identity of Jesus Christ as the one whose identity, uniquely, entails his presence."⁶ The cultural-linguistic work, in other words, points back to the particular, transcendent figure of Jesus Christ, as described in *Identity*.

I

Community, Literal Sense and Transcendence

Frei's essay, 'Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative' (a revised form of an address given in 1982 at Haverford College, Pennsylvania, where he shared the platform with Paul Ricoeur)⁷ is a useful starting point for explaining how a description of the Christian use of scripture highlights the normativity of the narrated identity of Jesus Christ, based not upon a falsely reified theory of 'narrativity' *per se*, but "discerned in the actual interpretive practices of Christian communities over time."⁸ Frei suggests that such 'interpretive practices' of the church cohere with the priority of a 'narrative' reading of the Gospels, a reading he labels the *sensus literalis* of scripture, by which he wants to describe not only a theoretical hermeneutical option, but also

⁵ Springs, *Toward*, 46. See also Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 74.

⁶ Fulford, *Divine*, 236.

⁷ For Ricoeur's paper, see Paul Ricoeur, 'Toward a Narrative Theology: Its Necessity, Its Resources, Its Difficulties', in Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 236–248.

⁸ Paul J. DeHart, *The Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 129.

the “sense of the text in its sociolinguistic context.”⁹ Following in particular Wittgenstein’s emphasis upon “the patterns of ordinary language use given within a social matrix”,¹⁰ Frei is unhappy to separate meaning from use, and therefore the Christology advocated in *Identity* comes to be elucidated also with reference to the social and cultural practice of the church. Granting Springs’ warning not to conceive of this essay as the point of departure for a break or shift in Frei’s thought,¹¹ one can nevertheless read it for Frei’s explanation of why he wants to approach theology more deliberately in this way. Supplementing that reading with Frei’s observations in ‘The “Literal Reading” of Biblical Narrative’ (1983) I will seek to articulate the relationship of the literal sense—the *sensus literalis*—of scripture to a theology of the transcendence of Jesus.

Frei begins ‘Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative’ by describing two different ways of understanding what Christian theology is. On the one hand, theology can be understood as a conceptual discourse about God—drawing upon, and often founded upon, general categories of philosophical investigation. Although Frei describes it very broadly, this approach undoubtedly includes that which can be broadly characterised as the apologetic theology of Culture Protestantism, wherein the relationship between religious truth and human culture is investigated and explained via general theories of ‘hermeneutics’, or the kind of historical *Wissenschaft* described in the previous chapter.¹² On the other hand, theologians can recognise the inseparability of any kind of conceptual content from the specific embodiment and practice of the Christian faith community—the church as a “social organism”¹³—and thus understand theology as more of a cultural-linguistic task. Theology conceived in the latter sense—focussed upon “the distinctive and irreducibly social functioning of Christian

⁹ Hans W. Frei, ‘Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative’, in Hans W. Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, edited by George Hunsinger and William Placher (Oxford: OUP, 1993), 104.

¹⁰ Nancey Murphy and Brad J. Kallenberg, ‘Anglo-American postmodernity’, in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge, CUP, 2003), 31.

¹¹ Springs, *Toward*, 42, n.5.

¹² Frei, ‘Theology’, 95, 101.

¹³ Frei, ‘Theology’, 96.

language”¹⁴—concentrates less on abstract general theories, and rather on a description of concepts as they are embodied by the social organism, the church.¹⁵

This has important theoretical consequences, insofar as,

Generalizing concepts like ‘meaning’ and ‘understanding’ ... are analytical tools that likewise function in context dependent ways, parasitic on first-order language, and not as unitary, context-invariant universals describing either translinguistic essences of transsituational internal processes or events.¹⁶

Frei suggests that if theology is more like a social-scientific enquiry than a conceptual philosophical investigation, the tools theologians employ are less likely to overtake that which is being described, precisely because what is occurring is a description rather than a definition. In Placher’s terms, theology conceived as a cultural-linguistic task resists domesticating its subject matter. Seen in broad perspective then, Frei’s sense of the formality of the theological enterprise therefore retains openness to God’s transcendence and to the particularity of Jesus and the Christian community.

Frei then explores how an account of the meaning of scripture might take shape when approached like this. He asks how the church’s relationship to the text is embodied in its practice of reading, and writes of a “strong family relationship”¹⁷ between a cultural-linguistic understanding of what theology is, and an approach to hermeneutics that resists separating the meaning of scripture from the text itself.¹⁸ There is a methodological fit, in other words, linking the relationship between

¹⁴ Frei, ‘Theology’, 101.

¹⁵ Note Rogers: “Christians say that Christ’s body is the church—in which Christ subjects himself to sociological analysis. Any theology that rejects the social sciences is anti-incarnational; any theology that thinks they are evil by privation of good and nothing else forgets that by its own teaching what is assumable is redeemable.” Eugene F. Rogers, *After the Spirit: A Constructive Pneumatology from Resources Outside the Modern West* (London: SCM, 2006), 55. This need not imply that such sociological analysis wholly defines/confines the person of Christ; but rather that such analysis is meaningful in relation to him—that despite its incapacity, it enables meaningful discourse about God’s activity towards and in the church.

¹⁶ Frei, ‘Theology’, 101.

¹⁷ Frei, ‘Theology’, 102.

¹⁸ “Theologians who approach scripture with the contextualist bent of interpretive social scientists rather than with a philosopher’s penchant for generalities are the ones most likely to read it in the traditional ways that Frei advocates.” Kathryn E. Tanner, ‘Theology and the plain sense’, in Garrett Green, *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 59.

communal practice and meaning on one hand, and the relationship between narrative and meaning on the other. Furthermore, historical particularity is preserved on both sides of this family relationship. The broad consensus toward the kind of narrative reading that preserves the unsubstitutable particularity of *Jesus* resides in the historically particular, acting *community*. Looking ‘inside’ the community (rather than away from it, to a general theory) for an understanding of the meaning of scripture for that community, coheres with looking ‘inside’ rather than behind or beyond the text for its meaning.

Frei suggests that the dominant sense of scripture (i.e. the way it is read) especially in the pre-critical period, was the *sensus literalis*, or the literal sense. He describes three dimensions of this: firstly, that the text is understood as an enacted intention of the author; secondly, that the text is understood to manifest a union of sense and reference; and thirdly that the recognition of what is the literal sense of the text is inseparable from the community that reads it. The first two ways of describing the *sensus literalis* concern what Frei previously called ‘narrative reading’ of the gospels; the third makes explicit the unavoidable cultural-linguistic context of that kind of reading.

Firstly then, as a reference to the text as enacted intention, the *sensus literalis* is understood along much the same lines as Frei’s insistence in *Identity* upon the unity between a person’s intention and their activity, insofar as the text is “an intelligibly enacted project, a unitary continuum rather than two separately intelligible acts, one mental, the other physical”.¹⁹ To read according to the *sensus literalis* is therefore to accept that one does not need to go behind the text to discover what the author intended to write, but that the text itself embodies the answer to that question. In the Christian tradition, of course, quite *whose* intention the text is enacting is a complex question, with the scriptures, for the most part, being understood as embodying some coherence between the intention of a human author and of God.²⁰ This is not without complexity, therefore, but those further questions are to be asked under the assumption that as far as the community is concerned the text manifests the author’s intended meaning.

¹⁹ Frei, ‘Theology’, 102.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Secondly, Frei uses *sensus literalis* to highlight the “descriptive fit” between the sense of a text (e.g. a description, a narrative) and its reference (e.g. that which is being described, narrated).²¹ Again, this continues the emphasis in *Identity*. To look behind or beyond the text for that to which it actually refers (which may or may not cohere with the author’s intention) is to transgress the *sensus literalis*. Here Frei points to something of quite a different order to Ricoeur’s thought, in which hermeneutics “passes through the detour of the text in the name of something beyond it ... the ‘matter of the text’”.²² Questions that are asked of the meaning of the text have to be asked of the text itself, for “[w]e have the reality only under the depiction and not in a language-neutral or language transcendent way.”²³ Chapter 3 explained how this yields an emphasis upon the historical particularity of Jesus as the locus of the text’s meaning, and not an embodiment of something deeper—and here Frei similarly describes how, for the community of faith, Jesus’ Kingdom parables are “seen in the light of the story identifying Jesus of Nazareth rather than (reversely) providing the clue for the theme of that story.”²⁴ As he puts it later on, “for the Christian interpretive tradition truth is what is written, not something separable and translinguistic that is written ‘about’”.²⁵ Both the first and second aspects of the *sensus literalis* summarise those things to which Frei had drawn attention in *Eclipse* and *Identity*.

Thirdly, Frei refers to the way the text “functions in the context of Christian life”.²⁶ Here the *sensus literalis* is explicated not with regard to a general theory, but in relation

²¹ Frei, ‘Theology’, 103.

²² Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 4. In the paper Ricoeur gave prior to Frei’s, there are many points the latter would agree with—for example, the capability for a ‘narrative theology’ to present an alternative to “speculative ... morally oriented ... existential” theology, void of real reference to Jesus and Judaism, and “indifferent to the historical dimension” (Ricoeur, ‘Toward’, 236); the insistence upon the history-likeness of biblical narrative (Ricoeur, ‘Toward’, 244); and also Ricoeur’s sense that what a text means must be asked in the context of how it is used by the community of faith. However, Ricoeur’s ultimate orientation away from the ‘inside’ of the text in his questions about meaning (Ricoeur, ‘Toward’, 240) constitutes a significant difference that Frei wants to call into question. See Frei’s description of Ricoeur’s “distinction ... between ‘what is written’ and ‘what it is written about’.” Hans W. Frei, ‘Conflicts in Interpretation’, in Frei, *Theology and Narrative*, 157.

²³ Frei, ‘Theology’, 103–104.

²⁴ Frei, ‘Theology’, 104.

²⁵ Frei, ‘Theology’, 108.

²⁶ Frei, ‘Theology’, 105.

to the community of faith in which this reading is practiced. The scripture and the community are inseparable in this case.

“Finally, the *sensus literalis* is the way the text has generally been used in the community. It is the sense of the text in its sociolinguistic context—liturgical, pedagogical, polemical, and so on.”²⁷

Essentially, Frei is drawing attention to what chapter 2 called ‘confessional context’. In this case, the *sensus literalis* of the text is the sense of the text that ‘fits’ with the community—prioritising as it does ‘literal’ or ‘narrative’ reading in such a way that makes sense to the community of faith. Frei occasionally uses the phrase ‘plain sense’ as a substitute for *sensus literalis*, also to describe the idea that the question of texts’ meaning is wrapped up with the way the community reads the text:

[A] specific set of texts, which happen to be narrative, has been assigned a literal reading as their primary or ‘plain’ sense. They have become the paradigm for the construal not only of what is inside that system but for all that is outside. They provide the interpretive pattern in terms of which *all* reality is experienced and read in this religion.²⁸

Prioritising a literal reading of the gospels (in which, as we saw in chapter 3, Jesus is understood to be the crucified and risen one who cannot be thought of as not-present) the community is thus in some way ‘normed’ by Jesus himself. The narratives at the heart of the community, which guide the way the community appropriates scripture itself, are narratives that imply the presence of Jesus Christ, whose identity is one with God’s. Loughlin summarises, “The scriptural text is used literally when the church seeks, in the circumstances of its time and place, to be conformed to the one whom scripture depicts.”²⁹

This practice of ‘Christological normativity’ therefore gives rise to Christological figural reading—reading the variety of literary forms in the New Testament in such a

²⁷ Frei, ‘Theology’, 104.

²⁸ Hans W. Frei, ‘The “Literal Reading” of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition’: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?, in Frei, *Theology and Narrative*, 148. In ‘Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative’, Frei also introduces the phrase “plain sense” to refer to the ‘function’ of the text “in the Christian life.” Frei, ‘Theology’, 105.

²⁹ Loughlin, *Telling*, 133.

way as they are focussed upon the narrative of Jesus—and also to figural reading of the Old Testament (its law and prophecy as well as its narrative). The fulfillment of the texts (in the various ways in which fulfillment can be understood) is agreed to be in Jesus Christ. A literal reading of Jesus’ story is “assigned primacy” over other non-literal ways of reading other texts (parables, for example) meaning that the “unifying force and prescriptive character” of the story of Jesus resides at the heart of the hermeneutical practice of the Christian community.³⁰

As described in chapter 3, if scripture depicts “one cumulative story”³¹ that pertains to the world inhabited by the reading community and not just a ‘world’ contained between the covers of the Bible, the ‘unifying force’ of the identity of Jesus extends to the life of the community itself and its relation to all reality. Not only are Old and New Testament texts read as having their fulfillment—what we might call their wholeness—in the person of Jesus; but this is also true of how Christians and Christian communities understand and ‘read’, as it were, their own lives. In a narrative reading of the texts, Christian communities can recognise the centrality of Jesus, as narratively rendered in the Gospels, for their *self*-understanding. Thus scripture is “taken up as interconstitutive of its users.”³² As Placher puts it, to accept that Jesus is the one who the texts say he is, is to “think through the Christian claims about the revelation of these texts to the Jesus to whom they witness ... [and] ... therefore to find oneself also thinking about their relation to one’s own life.”³³ Frei, then, is offering a theological understanding of scripture that recognises how a community’s use of scripture allows the transcendent person of Christ, as witnessed to in scripture, to norm our understanding of ourselves and the world.

³⁰ Frei, ‘Literal Reading’, 120–121. Lindbeck notes that this interpretive practice should serve to discredit simple supercessionism, insofar as “despite most later exegesis, the relation of *Israel’s* history to that of the *church* in the New Testament is not one of shadow to reality, or promise to fulfillment, or type to antitype. Rather, the kingdom already present in Christ alone is the antitype, and both Israel and the church are types.” George Lindbeck, ‘Critical exegesis and theological interpretation’, in Green, *Scriptural Authority*, 166.

³¹ Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 2.

³² Loughlin, *Telling*, 113.

³³ William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology and Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 96.

What Frei calls the “grammatical/syntactical sense” is therefore tied up with the focus upon “use-in-context”,³⁴ giving Frei a preferable alternative to any possibility that ‘narrative theory’ *per se* might overtake the subject of the narratives—i.e. Jesus.³⁵ Just as in *Eclipse* he resists subordinating the narratives to any general hermeneutical theory that divorces text and “reality referent”,³⁶ here he is also aware that the use of a category like ‘realistic narrative’ can also fall into a similar trap of functioning like another general theory, where the text itself becomes subsumed under a theory about the coincidence between narrative and meaning. In such a case, the question of ‘truth’ is suspended, because the relation between text and meaning is merely *internal*, the narrative itself thereby limited by the concept of narrativity *per se*.³⁷ The identity of Jesus to which the texts witness when read according to the *sensus literalis*, however, is truly beyond the community, thus mitigating such circularity.

Although Frei resists the reduction of the meaning of the text to the ‘fact’ question, this does not mean he sidelines the nature of the truth of the narratives. As we saw, he believes that gospels, and in particular the resurrection narratives, force the question of historical ‘truth’. The point is, though, that the narratives are what force that question, rather than being forced to answer it, and by virtue of that order of things, their relation to truth is stronger than their being more theoretically subjected to a modernist conception of ‘fact’ as the defining category. It is the forcing of the truth question from within the strangeness and familiarity of the narrative that allows for the question of truth and historical reference to point to God’s transcendent activity towards the world in history.

However, whilst Frei recognises that such a theory of narrativity would be less ambitious than general hermeneutical theory—insofar as it aims to articulate something about meaning rather than truth—there is still the possibility that “the less

³⁴ Frei, ‘Theology’, 110.

³⁵ “The plain sense of scripture is not a property of those texts that happen to function as scripture for the Christian community. One does not specify the meaning of the notion, therefore, by any philosophical discussion of hermeneutic circumstances or epistemological preconditions for the appropriation of texts in general ... The plain sense is instead viewed as a function of communal use: it is the obvious or direct sense of the text according to a *usus loquendi* established by the community in question.” Tanner, ‘Theology’, 62–63.

³⁶ Frei, ‘Literal Reading’, 125.

³⁷ Frei, ‘Literal Reading’, 140.

high-powered general theory that upholds the literal or realistic reading of the Gospels may be just as perilously perched as its more majestic and pretentious hermeneutical cousin.”³⁸ The scriptures, in other words, could be seen to mean literally because they fit under this category of narrative, and only as thus categorised do they relate to reality or truth. This again domesticates the identity at the heart of the Gospels, and makes the meaning of the gospels about the kind of text that they are, rather than the one to whom they witness. Cultural-linguistic description of the hermeneutical praxis of the Christian church, on the other hand, allows for the literal sense of a text to be *described* by terms like realistic narrative, but not *defined* under such terms.³⁹ The concept of *sensus literalis* therefore holds up only as a description of a context-specific practice of discernment of how to read the text, and not as a de-particularised general theory.⁴⁰

We must also be aware, though, not to merely replace the concept of ‘narrativity’ with the concept of ‘community consensus’. Whilst ‘community consensus’ *per se* is context specific and at least to that extent not generalising, the idea on its own can imply the community’s control over the text—or the community’s uncritical subjection to a repressive function of a text—in a way that does not reflect how Christian praxis should look fundamentally to Jesus Christ, the Other who gives the community its identity by giving himself.⁴¹ Pointing to the practice of figural reading within this discussion of the plain sense, Tanner says that by virtue of its coherence around the narrative of God in human form, the specific Christian ‘plain sense’ is “open ended”, involving “the constructive process of continually reinitiating a Christian self-

³⁸ Frei, ‘Literal Reading’, 141. “There may or may not be a class called ‘realistic narrative’, but to take it as a general category of which the synoptic Gospel narratives and their partial second order redescription in the doctrine of the Incarnation are a dependent instance is first to put the cart before the horse and then cut the lines and claim that the vehicle is self-propelled.” Frei, ‘Literal Reading’, 142–143.

³⁹ Frei, ‘Literal Reading’, 144.

⁴⁰ Williams describes this ‘discernment’ helpfully: “[I]f the community finds its focus in this or that set of narratives and practices, finds that *these* articulate what the community holds itself answerable to, then what authoritatively matters in the text, and so in some sense organizes the text for a reader in this corporate context, is what grounds or explicates these identifying features.” Rowan Williams, ‘The Literal Sense of Scripture’, *Modern Theology* (7:2, 1991), 130.

⁴¹ Concerning ‘repressive function’, Tanner speaks of the way in which the scripture could be understood to exercise a “repressive, hegemonic influence over the ongoing life of Christian communities, contemporary appeals to scripture being constricted through that influence into narrow channels of previous use.” Tanner, ‘Theology’, 72.

understanding by imaginatively repositioning the particulars of one's own life within a story."⁴² We can therefore explicitly point out that the particular story within which one 'repositions' one's life is that of God's transcendent activity towards the world in Christ, and that a truly theological account of scripture—here of the cultural-linguistic type—will recognise that the origin of the community's consensus on the *sensus literalis* resides in the act of God. Only with this particular clarification can the concept of 'community consensus' avoid overtaking the person of Jesus himself.

Higton therefore comments that just as the literal sense of the text is not self-justifying, neither is the literal sense "the arbitrary decision of the Christian community, paradoxically exercising its right to do what it wants with these texts by handing itself over to them."⁴³ Rather, Christians,

find themselves handed over to the text's witness to and repetition of the Word of God spoken to us in Christ. The resilient depiction of the identity of Jesus Christ at the heart of scripture, and the figural echoes by which this heart can organise the rest of scripture and then the whole world ... are the activity of God calling into being a people around this center.⁴⁴

The community that reads the texts literally is therefore constituted by an extrinsic—i.e. outward looking—relation. As Frei says, the texts narrate the history-like "agent enacting the unity of human finitude and divine infinity, Jesus of Nazareth",⁴⁵ and therefore the activity of one beyond the community. This illuminates again the Anselmian character of Frei's work, for the *sensus literalis* is essentially the praxis of a community of faith seeking understanding.

Hauerwas argues that the role of worship/liturgy is underdeveloped in Frei, and therefore points out that "without the liturgy the text remains just that—text ... before

⁴² Tanner, 'Theology', 74–75.

⁴³ Mike Higton, 'Hans Frei', in Justin S. Holcombe (ed.), *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 231.

⁴⁴ Higton, 'Hans Frei', 231. See also Frei, in a recently published lecture: "I still believe that I ought to leave open the possibility that a reading of the texts might actually and in principle influence modify, change these pre-conditions, rules, or what have you." Hans W. Frei, 'Historical Reference and the Gospels', in Hans W. Frei, *Reading Faithfully (vol. 1) Writings from the Archives: Theology and Hermeneutics*, edited by Mike Higton and Mark Alan Bowald (Oregon: Cascade: 2015), 96.

⁴⁵ Frei, 'Literal Reading', 143.

the church had the New Testament it nonetheless worshipped and prayed to God in the name of Jesus of Nazareth.”⁴⁶ Yet even supplementing Frei with Hauerwas’ focus on liturgical context, the nexus between text and the community of faith needs further explication not just in terms of a ‘fit’ between the reading and the worship of the community, but also in terms of the relation of both to two key particularities: the foundational apostolic community, and the person of the Holy Spirit. We turn, therefore, to these two.

i) *The apostolic community*

The transforming experiences of Jesus Christ within the original apostolic community of followers were foundational for their witness to and worship of him as God’s unique activity towards the world for its salvation. However, Frei’s work is comparatively thin when it comes to references to this community, and the addition of this emphasis is helpful, firstly because it serves to explore the nexus between community and text more deeply; and secondly because emphasis upon a particular community whose faith arose out of their experiences, highlights further the historically particular nature of God’s transcendent activity in Christ.

The suggestion that Frei’s theology would benefit from more explicit treatment of the original apostolic community has been made elsewhere. David Demson identifies an omission in Frei’s earlier work as regards the role of the apostles in the narrative of Jesus, and suggests that as a result the particular way in which the community of the apostles and the church is part of the enacted identity of Jesus is lost.⁴⁷ He proposes that Barth’s focus upon the call, gathering and upholding of the apostles functions as a corrective to Frei on this matter, especially as regards how we might understand a doctrine of the inspiration of scripture for the contemporary church.⁴⁸ However, the fact that Demson does not address Frei’s later cultural-linguistic essays weakens his

⁴⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, ‘The church as God’s new language’, in Green, *Scriptural Authority*, 196, n.11

⁴⁷ “Frei ... concentrating on Jesus’ enacted identity in relation to God and on its manifestation by the act of God, but scarcely at all on Jesus’ enacted identity in relation to the apostles and the confirmation of *that* identity by the act of God, leaves out of [*sic*] account the apostles’ identity—and ours, too, as participant in the apostles’ identity.” David Demson, *Hans Frei and Karl Barth: Different Ways of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 95.

⁴⁸ Demson, *Hans Frei*, 109.

assessment of how Frei understands the nexus between community and text.⁴⁹ For his part, Jason Springs also recognises that any kind of hermeneutical ‘rule’ in the Christian community was not “simply the result of the accruing consensus in that community. The rule derived its authority from the truth of the *apostolic witness* which accorded with the claims of Scripture.”⁵⁰

Below, I suggest that Richard Bauckham’s work in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (2006) can effectively supplement Frei’s account of the fit between scripture and the community, pointing as it does to the category of testimony as a broad description of the bulk of the gospel texts, and doing so with the kind of epistemological nuance that chimes with the way Frei thinks about history—i.e. articulating the historiographical credibility of testimony whilst resisting the domination of post-enlightenment historical criticism. Bauckham accounts for the role of those who testify in and to the original community, and recognises that the texts—which emerge from the engagement of the authors with the testimony of the witnesses—need to be read in a way that takes into account the utter uniqueness of the events to which they testify.

Bauckham argues that the gospels emerge from communities shaped by the testimony of individual eyewitnesses to Jesus’ ministry—those individual identities therefore being crucial within the gospel tradition. He suggests that questions about the historiographical character of the gospel narratives should therefore be concerned with their connection to eyewitness testimony, and that understanding the texts as rooted in testimony to extraordinary events is theologically preferable compared to the reductionist tendencies of the historical-critical methods typical of late modernity, which tried to argue for the verification of the narratives according to universal reason. There is a fundamental dissimilarity between the modernist critical focus upon repeatable individual verification, and the way testimonies ask for the trust of the reader/hearer.

⁴⁹ It is for this reason that I have elected to explore this issue in this chapter rather than the previous one. If one makes suggestions about supplementing Frei’s implications as regards the identity of Jesus and its impact upon the church, it makes sense to take into account Frei’s later elucidations of what I have called Christological normativity, even if those too are lacking a focus on the original apostles and the Holy Spirit (see below).

⁵⁰ Springs, *Toward*, 152. My italics.

This need not mean that [testimony] asks to be trusted uncritically, but it does mean that testimony should not be treated as credible only to the extent that it can be independently verified ... Trusting testimony is not an irrational act of faith that leaves critical rationality aside; it is, on the contrary the rationally appropriate way of responding to authentic testimony.⁵¹

To accept testimony as historiographically and theologically appropriate, therefore, is to call modern historical critical assumptions into question. Two key features of testimony highlight this. Firstly, testimony requires that we accept the social/communal nature of ‘knowledge’ as just as fundamental to human epistemology as the notion of an individual knowing things autonomously. Accepting testimonies as historiographically meaningful shines a critical light on a Cartesian reduction to autonomous, purely individualistic epistemology, appealing instead to the “communal or inter-subjective” aspect of knowledge. Bauckham suggests that “epistemic trust is the basic matrix within which the individual can acquire and exercise what Coady calls ‘a robust degree of cognitive autonomy’”.⁵² He therefore asks for a degree of trust in the gospel narratives that is afforded to other sources and witnesses in life in general. Just because one cannot individually ‘verify’ that which is testified in the Gospels does not mean one cannot accept them as historical sources to be trusted as they ask to be.

In Frei’s terms, Bauckham accepts the text as a fit enactment of the author’s intention. Although historians can enquire of things that yield information ‘in spite of themselves’ (i.e. not intending to be a record of something *per se* but functioning as one nonetheless—like archeological discoveries, for example) in the case of the Gospels we can understand ourselves to be “reading the explicit testimonies of the past for the sake of what they were *intended* to recount and reveal”.⁵³ Furthermore, there is no

⁵¹ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006), 5.

⁵² Bauckham, *Jesus*, 477. Quote from C. A. J. Coady, *Testimony* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 99–100. See also Stanley Hauerwas: “[E]ach speaker of a particular linguistic community is connected through the members of that community, living and dead, to a range of experience exceeding the speakers’ own.” Hauerwas, ‘The church’, 192.

⁵³ Bauckham, *Jesus*, 483. My italics.

possibility of going behind those testimonies to an isolated ‘fact’ that we can approach in abstraction from the testimony itself.⁵⁴

Secondly, Bauckham argues that testimony is theologically appropriate, because of the way it gives room for the exceptionality of the events testified to. As we have seen in the previous chapter, an historical-critical approach guided purely by what we can imagine or most likely expect to have happened, given what we know about the historical world, places a limit upon the interpretation of the texts, reducing their meaning to the question of factuality or likelihood. Testimony, however, counters a tendency to trust only our own experiences and reduce the text to fit our own epistemological framework.

[W]ithout the participant witness that confronts us with the sheer otherness of the event, we will reduce it of the measure of our own experience. In such cases, insider testimony may puzzle us or provoke disbelief, but, for the sake of maintaining the quest for truth of history, we must allow the testimony to resist the limiting pressure of our own experiences and expectations.⁵⁵

Testimony, in short, is one way in which we can come up against ‘otherness’ in history, in such a way that modernist reductionism simply does not allow.

To support this argument, Bauckham draws on another form of testimony to an exceptional event—holocaust testimony—which, he suggests, parallels the gospels in the sense of being an event “at the limits”, or possessing a “unique uniqueness” (both phrases are Ricoeur’s).⁵⁶ Like the gospels, holocaust testimony discloses something exceptional that we would not perceive, or be forced to come to terms with, apart from the testimony itself. Furthermore, like the evangelists, the holocaust eyewitnesses also embody an imperative to communicate what they witnessed.⁵⁷

Bauckham cites two specific cases wherein holocaust eyewitnesses communicate their testimony via “different narrative ways of conveying without distorting the truth they

⁵⁴ “[W]e cannot establish the truth of the testimony for ourselves as though we stood where the witnesses uniquely stood.” Bauckham, *Jesus*, 505.

⁵⁵ Bauckham, *Jesus*, 492.

⁵⁶ Bauckham, *Jesus*, 492–493.

⁵⁷ Bauckham, *Jesus*, 499–501.

witnessed.”⁵⁸ Briefly, one example works apophatically by describing the eyewitness’ glimpse of the ‘normal’ world outside of Auschwitz in contrast to the distortion of reality in which she lives; the other develops its power through the witness’ intertextual reflection upon a phrase by Dostoyevsky’s Ivan Karazmov—‘everything is permitted’—in relation to the horrifying burning alive of children and babies.⁵⁹ The narrative form of each of these testimonies, in which skills are employed to communicate a truth quite beyond our normal set of experiences, makes for the testimony’s effectiveness. Despite the manifest and manifold differences between holocaust eyewitness testimony and eyewitness testimony to Jesus, Bauckham suggests they possess commonality in “their exceptionality and the role of testimony in conveying this, insofar as it can be conveyed”.⁶⁰

Bauckham therefore argues that the historiographical credibility afforded holocaust testimonies should be afforded the gospels too, on the grounds of their possessing this similarity in witnessing to utterly exceptional events. Like Frei, he wants to “beware of a historical methodology that prejudices inquiry against exceptionality in history and is biased toward the leveling down of the extraordinary to the ordinary”, and also wants to resist turning historical uniqueness into an analytical category which itself overtakes the particularity of the events themselves—events which possess commonality insofar as they “resist all reduction to ‘business as usual’ in history”.⁶¹ In other words, the category of ‘historicity’ is shaped by the narratives themselves, rather than a pre-ordained concept according to normal experience or factuality.

Bauckham’s work is a useful supplement to Frei’s cultural-linguistic analysis of the *sensus literalis*. Where there may be a temptation for Frei’s interpreters to infer a circular relationship between text and community, the category of testimony accounts for the communal and inter-subjective nature of epistemology (thus remaining within a cultural-linguistic framework) and also connects the text itself with an original community who were present to, and drawn into, a formative set of events. Using the word ‘testimony’ reminds us of the texts’ inseparability not only from the community

⁵⁸ Bauckham, *Jesus*, 499.

⁵⁹ Bauckham, *Jesus*, 493–499. Re. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karazmov*, trans. David Margarshack (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 77.

⁶⁰ Bauckham, *Jesus*, 499.

⁶¹ Bauckham, *Jesus*, 506.

that reads them, but also from the community of witnesses out of whose experience and compulsion to testify they arise. Furthermore, the trust placed in testimony by the hearers and readers is a practice rather than a theory, and therefore coheres with Frei's desire to describe a Christian theology of scripture in cultural-linguistic terms rather than general theory.

There are, however, two points requiring careful nuance when introducing Bauckham's term. Firstly, not all history-likeness in the gospels can be labelled 'testimony'. Bauckham himself suggests that the narrative sequence grounded upon eyewitness testimony—similar in all four Gospels—runs broadly from the narrative of John the Baptist to the resurrection appearances, thus not including, for example, the infancy prologues of Matthew and Luke, nor the cosmic prologue of John.⁶² He calls Luke's infancy narratives, "a preliminary account of events that would give his main story an appropriate background and context",⁶³ even though in Frei's terms they remain broadly 'history-like'. This does not render the category of testimony un-useful, but it pays to clarify that what is important for this argument is the emphasis upon the inseparability of the text from an original community who were "telling stories of significance."⁶⁴ The exact relation of every portion of the text—including evidently history-like portions—to eyewitnesses is not what is at stake here, but it pays to recognise that there are sections that seem to fall between the gaps. For example, although the temptation narratives belong in the sequence that Bauckham connects with eyewitness testimony (from John the Baptist to the resurrection), they narrate Jesus on his own without anyone to witness, and also push hard at the limits of history-likeness (in narrating the appearance of the devil). I therefore draw on Bauckham's category in a broad sense, recognising the need for clarification on how some texts fit into his scheme, but also recognising that this is peripheral to this particular argument.

Secondly however, when it comes to Bauckham's analysis of exceptionality, he comes close to another equivocation. Whilst he does indeed recognise the "vastly different"⁶⁵ character of gospel and holocaust testimonies, his point relies to a certain extent on

⁶² Bauckham, *Jesus*, 114.

⁶³ Bauckham, *Jesus*, 122.

⁶⁴ Bauckham, *Jesus*, 472.

⁶⁵ Bauckham, *Jesus*, 499.

the use of ‘exceptionality’ as a general category. Although the word exceptionality makes sense in each individual case, the holocaust witnesses testify to the exceptional horror of systematic de-humanisation and extermination, and the gospels to the exceptional saving activity of God in Christ. Their exceptionality is of a different kind—the first being an exceptionality of human evil and the second of God’s transcendent activity in history. A careless reading of Bauckham’s point, therefore, risks unhelpful equivocation. To conflate the exceptionality of both these events is to risk an unfruitful comparison between the two—to either speak of the holocaust as somehow not quite as exceptional as Jesus, or perhaps even to speak of the incarnation as not quite as wholly ‘historical’ as the holocaust. ‘Historiography’ is doing a *different* thing when narrating the exceptional activity of the transcendent God in history as it is when narrating the exceptional activity of the Nazis in the 1930s–1940s. Bauckham’s comparison with holocaust testimony is meaningful insofar as it highlights the need for testimony to point beyond what can easily be imagined, but it does not serve to demonstrate the same kind of trust regarding an exceptional event as the kind of trust, or faith, that Christian readers develop in relation to their reading of the Gospels.

Paul Janz (following Donald MacKinnon) gets closer to the nub of the matter, when he describes how thinking about how our relation to tragedies such as the holocaust can help us think about how we describe and relate to God’s transcendent activity, but only insofar as there is a similarity in how the *reference* itself operates in each case. Something about the epistemological finality of the tragedy of the holocaust—i.e. the way “any attempt to account for this evil ... utterly breaks apart and shatters against the actual, individual and collective, tangible experiences of ineluctable human demise”⁶⁶—means that the way we talk about it bears an incomplete but nonetheless meaningful relation to the reality. In a similar way, Janz suggests, we can make meaningful reference to the transcendent activity of God, despite the *finality* it constitutes for rationality. He highlights, more forcefully than Bauckham, that “[i]t is not as if tragedy and transcendence are ‘similar’, or as if the former becomes a model of some sort for the latter”.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Paul D. Janz, *God, the Mind’s Desire: Reference, Reason and Christian Thinking* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), 21.

⁶⁷ Janz, *God*, 22.

Frei retains the same kind of metaphysical differentiation that Janz hints at here, noting that what Janz calls the *finality* of the incarnation has its exceptionality in its being beyond metaphysical normality, and thus any ‘normal’ level of factuality *per se*.

Is Jesus Christ ... a ‘fact’ like other historical facts? Should I really say that the eternal Word made flesh, that is, made fact indeed, is a fact like any other? I can talk about Jesus in that way, but can I talk about the eternal Word made flesh that way?⁶⁸

Frei, I think, would have to say that whilst it is quite true that both incarnation and holocaust stretch our conception of what we can imagine to be possible, they do so in different manners. Thus, if we take on Bauckham’s proposal regarding the gospels as testimony—as indeed I suggest we should—we must nevertheless allow, as Frei does, for a kind of metaphysical nuance to shape the way Bauckham describes exceptionality.

Taking this caution into account though, Bauckham’s work can be used to suggest something like this: Understanding the gospels as testimony retains focus upon the practice (not theory) of trust and faith in the Christian community, whilst also explicitly connecting that reading community with the community from which the texts originated, and with the historically particular experience of individuals. The normativity of the text for the Christian community therefore derives from its relationship to the historically particular experience of the apostolic community of testimony. Testimony is trusted not on the basis of an individualistic model of epistemology, but by the common practice of epistemic trust in knowledge as communal. The particularity of the testimony therefore takes priority over a post-enlightenment theory of knowledge, and the practice of trust in particular testimony takes priority over a theory. On that basis, testimony can refer meaningfully to that which is beyond our normal comprehension of the world, and holocaust testimony is an example of one kind of ‘stretching’ that belief in testimony entails. The activity of God in Jesus Christ and the holocaust each possess exceptionality in a different way, so whilst trust/faith in God’s transcendent work in history calls for a different kind of ‘stretching’ than is required of us when reading or hearing the terrifying holocaust

⁶⁸ Hans W. Frei, ‘Response to “Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal”’, in Frei, *Theology and Narrative*, 211.

testimonies, testimony remains a meaningful way of describing both—and therefore, in this case, of the way in which Christians’ interaction with the gospel texts relates to the original apostolic community.

ii) *The Holy Spirit*

In *Eclipse* Frei had described Calvin’s doctrine of the role of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of scripture—highlighting in particular the cohesion of the Spirit’s testimony with the ‘meaning’ of the text, and therefore the role the Spirit was understood to play in the way the text ‘means’ for the community.⁶⁹ However, not only does this emphasis fade towards the mid-portion of *Eclipse*, but more importantly this notion of the Spirit as somehow active in ‘literal’ hermeneutics is not explicated in Frei’s later essays. Chapter 3 noted the pneumatological reflection towards the end of *Identity*—concerning the connection between Jesus, the Spirit and the community—but again, this is not carried through with any weight into Frei’s later essays. If emphasis upon the particularity of the original apostolic testimony is crucial to the nexus between the community and scripture, then the particular work of the Holy Spirit should also be emphasised in that same nexus. Reminding ourselves of Rogers’ emphasis upon the particular identity of the Spirit identified in interaction with the Son (see chapter 3) we recognise that the apostolic community of witness is also the community of Pentecost, insofar as their witness is enabled by God’s activity: “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, *as the Spirit gave them ability*.”⁷⁰

The original community, and the community which subsequently reads the text according to the normative identity of Jesus Christ, is the recipient of God’s generous gift of Godself in the Spirit. Frei himself does state that “[t]he primacy of the *sensus literalis* is in effect an assertion of the fitness and congruence of the ‘letter’ to be the channel of the *spirit*”,⁷¹ pointing to the fact that that scripture’s history-like depiction

⁶⁹ Frei, *Eclipse*, 22–23.

⁷⁰ Acts 2:4. On the union of the Spirit’s activity with Christ’s activity in the Pentecost narrative, consider how the gift of the Spirit is the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise of the baptism with the Spirit (Acts 1:5) for the purpose of being his witnesses in the power of the Spirit (Acts 1:8), this coming after he has instructed them through the Spirit (Acts 1:2).

⁷¹ Frei, ‘Theology’, 108. My italics.

of Jesus Christ is “sufficient” for orienting Christians within the “real world” of God’s activity.⁷² Nevertheless emphasis upon the active, generous *person* of the Holy Spirit in the reading community is thin to say the least, but is required for a full account of the inspiration of scripture.⁷³ Nathan Hershberger recognises that Frei’s theology of scripture does indeed imply that “it is not with a particular style of reading ... or the inculcation of a ‘biblical worldview’—that Christ will be made present to us, but rather through the action of God in Christ by the Spirit” and that it is therefore by the Spirit that “the efficacy of Scripture is finally in God’s hands, not ours”;⁷⁴ but there still remains the need to highlight the nexus between the Holy Spirit, active in the life of Jesus and of the first apostolic community, and the contemporary reading community. Unless that fourfold relation—Spirit, apostles, text, community—is properly recognised, there will always be a weak link in the concept of the hermeneutical normativity of Jesus Christ. This is not to say that the texts possess no meaning or power in and of themselves, but it is to say that a theologically dynamic approach to the way the identity of Christ exerts pressure on the reading community requires an account of historical witness that includes a pneumatological, and therefore Trinitarian, dimension. Lamb’s constructive proposal in his recent survey of theologies of scripture encapsulates what is required here, highlighting how “[p]articipation in the triune life of God provides the proper context for consideration of the inspiration of scripture”.⁷⁵ Thus the community’s reading of scripture is connected not just with a kind of religious cogency, but also with a genuinely outward looking hopefulness towards sanctification and salvation.

[W]hen we encounter the divine mystery, we may find that we are overwhelmed and transformed by the holiness of God (Isa. 6.1–13). It is in this sense that Christians can speak of *Holy* Scripture.⁷⁶

⁷² Frei, ‘Literal Reading’, 143.

⁷³ Loughlin, *Telling*, 114.

⁷⁴ Nathan Hershberger, ‘Patience as Hermeneutical Practice: Christ, church, and Scripture in John Howard Yoder and Hans Frei’, *Modern Theology* (31: 2015), 563.

⁷⁵ William Lamb, *Scripture: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.149. David Kelsey, too, emphasises that the Spirit, “sent by the Father with the Son ... is present as the always-already-there context of the lives of personal bodies who are members of such communities, precisely in, through, and under the communities’ enactments of such practices.” David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, vol 1., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 443–445.

⁷⁶ Lamb, *Scripture*, 150.

Overall, the cultural-linguistic form of investigation into the *sensus literalis* of scripture—especially when supplemented with Bauckham’s approach to testimony, and a recognition of the particular work of the person of the Spirit—enables Frei to propose the centrality of a literal reading of the narrative, and therefore the centrality of the unsubstitutable identity of Jesus, not on the basis of a general theory of narrativity *per se*, but on the basis of a description of the community of faith. Jesus, the crucified and risen One who is present by the Holy Spirit, is the one whose identity norms the community’s practice, and in whose likeness the community is fashioned. Jesus is therefore the one who transcends the church not just by being beyond or distant but also by exerting what Springs calls “constraints”⁷⁷ upon the church’s activity, in the complex nexus between Spirit, apostles, community and text, whereby the community that worships Jesus Christ as God recognises his continual activity towards them by the work of God the Holy Spirit, and postures itself humbly in relation to that activity.⁷⁸ At the heart of the theologically dense cultural-linguistic hermeneutic derived from Frei’s later work, we therefore encounter again the inseparability of the historical particularity of Jesus from his being the one who is

⁷⁷ Springs, *Toward*, 154.

⁷⁸ In an article in 2001, Ray Anderson articulates how a community might practice this kind of Christological normativity, by asking not just what a particular scriptural passage might say about an issue when viewed in abstraction, but how it might be understood in the light of the work of Christ, by the Holy Spirit, in the community’s midst—in this case, the bestowal of gifts for apostolic/pastoral ministry upon women and men in equal weight. Ray S. Anderson, ‘The Resurrection of Jesus as Hermeneutical Criterion’, in Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2001), 98–99. Suggesting that the resurrection of Jesus is the ‘hermeneutical criterion’ for the church, Anderson highlights that the living *person* of Jesus is the church’s norm, because—as Frei articulated in detail in *Identity*—the resurrection as an event implies the presence of the risen one. The “presence and authority” of the risen Christ norms hermeneutics insofar as the person of Jesus himself, by the Holy Spirit, continues to teach and instruct the church—the task of hermeneutics being to discern the substance of that teaching in relation to the scriptures. Anderson, ‘Resurrection’, 84. Consequently, the scriptures are spoken about as ‘the Word of God’ insofar as they “bind the interpreters of scripture to Jesus Christ as the living Lord”. Anderson, ‘Resurrection’, 86. The notion of scriptural authority is subjugated to the authority of Jesus himself, with Anderson, like Frei, rejecting any kind universally ‘religious’ criterion for interpretation of scripture, and resisting the danger of ‘shifting’ the hermeneutical criteria “from the Word of God itself to a hermeneutical principle that controls the exegetical task”. Anderson, ‘Resurrection’, 88, 96. Sometimes, the normativity of the person of Jesus, who is understood to be *active* towards the church, requires a re-evaluation of the church’s reading of the scriptures themselves. In Frei’s language, the *sensus literalis* of the texts places a “*high Christology*” at the heart of the church’s self-understanding. See, e.g. Hans W. Frei, ‘On Interpreting the Christian Story’, in Frei, *Reading Faithfully*, 82. See also Hauerwas, “The church must always remain open to revision since the subject of its narrative is easily domesticated.” Hauerwas, ‘The church’, 193.

God's transcendent act in the world, and in whose identity the world, and those who live in, it find their fulfillment.⁷⁹

iii) *Summary*

Frei's later work maintains the coherence of Jesus' historical particularity with his transcendence. That this coherence resides in the cultural-linguistic practice of the church is itself an historically particular state of affairs open to transcendence—i.e. geared towards the One who is beyond the community. Understood theologically, the cultural-linguistic state of affairs is the work of the Holy Spirit at the level of real practicing community—it never collapses into de-particularisation but remains a communal event as the church continually seeks to let itself be shaped into the likeness of Christ by the Spirit. The church's own life, then, is not just *based upon* a unity of particularity and transcendence, but *is* that in itself too. It makes sense only as the work of God in and towards the community—work that therefore cannot be articulated in abstraction from that community.⁸⁰

The most important aspects of Hans Frei's theology for this thesis have now been laid out. Running through his work is the connection between Jesus' historical particularity and his transcendence, with the recognition that such transcendence-in-particularity informs both the definiteness and the humility of the Christian community. We have seen how Frei looks in detail at the role of the scriptures and the community's use of them, and in doing so pinpoints the way Christian theology remains conceptually open/humble when it understands its hermeneutical practice as normed by Jesus Christ narrated in scripture, rather than hermeneutical categories norming its Christology.

To fully appreciate the importance scholars attach to Frei as a theologian of a 'middle way', though, we need to look briefly at *Types of Christian Theology*, wherein the concepts of humility, flexibility and open-endedness are more explicitly laid out. Once

⁷⁹ Colossians 1:15–20.

⁸⁰ "Whatever it was that the church meant to say, whatever was revealed or manifested to it could be indicated only in connection with an historical person and events in the life of his community. The confession referred to history and was consciously made in history." H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 23.

more, the way Frei brings these qualities to the surface is related to the person of Jesus, whose transcendence is best articulated at the level of historical particularity.

II

Christological Transcendence and Theological Flexibility

i) Types of Christian Theology

Types of Christian Theology (1992) is a posthumously published collection of essays on theological typology that Frei intended to develop into a history of modern Christology.⁸¹ Just as ‘Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative’ explores two different ways of considering what theology *is*, *Types* explores five “attitudes” to how theology is understood—in particular whether its most natural “affiliate” is philosophy (as a general “criteria of intelligibility” under which theology establishes its meaningfulness) or the descriptive social sciences.⁸² Mapping the various ways in which Christian theology can be understood, in *Types* Frei asks, “what kind of theology is most nearly hospitable to the literal sense of scripture?”⁸³

Frei lays out a fivefold typology concerning the relation of theology to external disciplines—from theology totally subjugated to external philosophical/historical-critical criteria at one end of the spectrum (Type 1) to theology operating totally independently from, and essentially inaccessible and un-relatable to such external categories of understanding (Type 5). In between these two extremes he describes varying degrees to which this relationship between internal self-description and external critical disciplines can be nuanced (Types 2–4). Frei himself suggests that the kind of theology most ‘hospitable’ to the *sensus literalis* (on the whole, Type 4) understands its relation to external disciplines as operating in an *ad hoc* manner, guided or normed by the way the community affords priority to the identity of Jesus Christ, as narrated in the gospels. Thus that which can be described cultural-

⁸¹ See David Kelsey, George Lindbeck and Gene Outka, ‘Forward’, in Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, edited by George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (Yale: Yale University Press, 1992), vii.

⁸² Frei, *Types*, 2.

⁸³ Frei, *Types*, 18. My italics. Frei outlines the *sensus literalis* in the same way here as he does in ‘Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative’. Frei, *Types*, 15–16.

linguistically takes flexible priority over the general philosophical “criteria of intelligibility”.⁸⁴ This means that philosophical, historical or social-scientific categories are employed to *describe* and *examine* the faith of the church, rather than the faith being categorically subjected to those disciplines as if they were more fundamental categories for meaning.

Theology therefore possesses an abiding flexibility and revisability, grounded on this asymmetrical relationship between Christian ‘self-description’ (an internal confessional context) and external academic disciplines such as philosophy. This asymmetry is itself rooted in the priority of the *sensus literalis* of scripture, which means it is grounded on the normative identity of Jesus for the community.⁸⁵ Theologians can recognise that external disciplines may be of help, but also that theology is not about a total ‘grasp’ of their own belief according to general categories of universal reason, but about describing their commitment in faith to witness to Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit.⁸⁶ This functions as an effective summary of how a theology of the transcendence of Jesus—especially manifest in the *sensus literalis* of scripture—plays a vital role in grounding the simultaneously robust and yet also humble character of Frei’s theology.⁸⁷

It is generally accepted that Frei’s preferred ‘type’ of theology is the fourth, but also that the third type manifests significantly important characteristics that cannot be discarded. Type 3 aims for an equal correlation between philosophy and theology, with Schleiermacher as its main example. Schleiermacher, says Frei, avoids a totally

⁸⁴ Frei, *Types*, 2.

⁸⁵ “General categories, like descriptive generalizations of any kind with regard to revelation, incarnation, and redemption are subordinated to, contained in, governed by the logical subject, ‘Jesus Christ’. Hans W. Frei, ‘Letter to William Placher, November 3, 1986’, in Frei, *Reading Faithfully*, 45.

⁸⁶ Acts 1:8.

⁸⁷ This type of theology again sits comfortably alongside H. Richard Niebuhr’s typology in *Christ and Culture* (1951). Niebuhr’s own preference, that Christ should be understood as the ‘transformer of culture’ rather than one either against or subsumed by culture, complements Frei’s *ad hoc* approach to the relationship between Christian self-description and external academic disciplines. Niebuhr understood that seeing Christ as a transformer retains a “positive and hopeful attitude towards culture” whilst resisting the idea of a synthesis between Christ and Culture or a dualism between the two. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 191. The relationship, in other words, is positively asymmetric. Niebuhr holds together both the positive approach to culture and creation with the proclamation of the Lordship of Christ, who “as the given historical reality in our human history ... is the cornerstone on which we build.” Niebuhr, *Christ*, 255.

‘flat’ correlation between Christian language and philosophical analysis because he recognises that Christian theology, including its relationship to external disciplines such as philosophy and history, is a strictly second order task. Theology is at best a description of, or “reflection on”⁸⁸ the first order language of the Christian experience of religious relationship to God, or awareness of absolute dependence upon God that constitutes the relation with God itself.

At the first order level then, Schleiermacher is against establishing Christian meaning upon external general philosophical foundations, and thus to Frei’s mind retains an important nuance.⁸⁹ At the second order (descriptive) level, though, Schleiermacher proposes that,

Theology as an academic enterprise and Christian self-description in the church must be correlated. Philosophy and theology must be correlated. External and self-description of Christianity must be correlated, and in each case, two factors are autonomous yet reciprocally related, but that reciprocity and mutual autonomy is not explained by any more basic structure of thought under which the two factors would be included.⁹⁰

Here, therefore, philosophical and phenomenological descriptions of human religious experience cohere with Christian theological language about what that religious experience is, but the two remain “ultimately technically independent of each other”.⁹¹ Christianity is not a particular instance of a general class or ‘religion’ and neither is the identity of Jesus read in a “rationalist allegorical” way.⁹² The former is simply another way of describing that which the latter describes. Christologically, Schleiermacher is effectively saying that “the believer has access to the Saviour or Redeemer ... in a way different from that of the historian”,⁹³ but that the two

⁸⁸ Frei, *Types*, 35.

⁸⁹ “[T]he present work entirely disclaims the task of establishing on a foundation of general principles the Doctrine of God, or an Anthropology or Eschatology either, which should be used in the Christian church though it did not really originate there, or which should prove the propositions of the Christian Faith to be consonant with reason.” Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), 3.

⁹⁰ Frei, *Types*, 38.

⁹¹ Hans W. Frei, ‘Niebuhr’s Theological Background’, in Paul Ramsey (ed.), *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 36.

⁹² Frei, *Types*, 72.

⁹³ Frei, *Types*, 72.

nonetheless have ‘access’.⁹⁴ In summary, Type 3 concerns an often *ad hoc* but nevertheless equal correlation between internal description of the Christian faith and external disciplines such as philosophy and history. The *ad hoc* nature of the correlation is positive to Frei’s mind, but the ultimate equality implied is problematic, especially concerning the ‘availability’ of Jesus to historical criticism. As Frei remarks at the end of his essay on Strauss, the question of whether this correlation is possible—especially in Christological terms—has lingered since the inception of modernity, and characterises the history of Culture Protestantism.⁹⁵

To elucidate Type 4, with which Frei himself is most regularly identified, Frei turns to Barth’s theology, focussing on something very different to the description of Barth’s early work as manifesting an epistemological monophysitism. Barth, says Frei, compellingly elucidates how the academic philosophical endeavor serves the church, whose responsibility it is to speak faithfully about and to God—a task for which external disciplines of philosophy and historical-criticism can be useful, and indeed for which, as Higton puts it, they are “properly fitted.”⁹⁶ Barth, says Frei, bids us “look steadily at the text and what the text says, and then you utilise, on an *ad hoc* basis, what the historical scholars offer you. You cannot state systematically or in a general theory what the relation between theological exegesis and historical criticism is.”⁹⁷ The language and, crucially, the praxis of the Christian faith community is therefore the context in which the academic disciplines are deployed to aid self-description. Barth himself describes how faithful reflection on scripture necessarily involves “mode[s] of thought and philosophy”,⁹⁸ but is clear that “the choice of a particular mode of thought for its serviceableness in this reflection is the business of *grace*”,⁹⁹ and that the modes of thought are ‘good’ in themselves only insofar as they are subordinated to scripture itself, rather than in and of themselves. Frei therefore summarises:

⁹⁴ As Frei briefly recalls in *Types*, this is the view that Strauss so roundly rejected, because of its attempt to cross what was perceived as the unbridgeable gap between historical consciousness and faith in Jesus as the universal redeemer. Frei, *Types*, 72.

⁹⁵ Hans W. Frei, ‘David Friedrich Strauss’, in Ninian Smart, John Clayton, Patrick Sherry and Steven T. Katz (eds.), *Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West*, vol.1. (Cambridge: CUP, 1985), 255.

⁹⁶ Higton, *Christ*, 200. E.g. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2: The Word of God* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 729–736.

⁹⁷ Hans W. Frei, ‘Scripture as Realistic Narrative: Karl Barth as a Critic of Historical Criticism’, in Frei, *Reading Faithfully*, 49.

⁹⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, 730.

⁹⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, 734.

In this highly formal sense, acknowledging the need for formal rules and criteria, but letting their use be governed by the specific theological issue at hand, and by the general rule that absolute priority be given to Christian theology as Christian self-description within the religious community called the church, or the Christian community, Barth acknowledges the need for a formal or technical philosophical vocabulary in theology.¹⁰⁰

Tools such as philosophy and historical-criticism are therefore utilised on an *ad hoc* basis, not norming but being normed by Christian self-understanding—at the heart of which is the *sensus literalis* of scripture, and therefore the particular identity of Jesus of Nazareth. This does not mean that Christian self-understanding is immune to challenge or re-shaping, but it does mean that the ‘pressure’ exerted by, say, philosophy on Christian dogmatics, is a result of a case-by-case deployment of external disciplines and critical resources, rather than by virtue of their possessing mastery of general categories.¹⁰¹ In a recently published letter to Gary Comstock, which supports the consensus that Type 4 is that which best fits Frei’s own views, he offers a remarkably clear elucidation of this kind of position:

I am a Christian theologian and do not regard philosophy as ever having achieved that clearly demonstrated set of even formal certainties (and agreements) in 2,500 years that would allow it the kind of authoritative status you seem to want to accord it; and yet I believe theology cannot do without philosophy. Furthermore, theology cannot even invest so much in the foundational/anti-foundational debate as to come out (*qua* theology) *in principle* on the anti-foundational side.¹⁰²

In the case of the incarnation, this means that whilst the possibility of a person being “at once human and divine is not intrinsically irrational ... the *condition* of its

¹⁰⁰ Frei, *Types*, 41

¹⁰¹ Barth is clear that this ‘case by case’ approach concerns not just *what* philosophical tool one might employ, but also the fact that the same tool may sometimes be useful in the service of faithful reading of scripture, and other times may be problematic. Indeed, this is the proper order of things, for he asks, “[h]ow can we bind ourselves to one philosophy as the only philosophy, and ascribe to it a universal necessity, without actually positing it as something absolute as the necessary partner of the Word of God and in that way imprisoning and falsifying the Word of God? Thus from the point of view of scriptural exegesis the relevance of the inner conflicts and debates and the whole history of philosophy as the history of human modes of thought can only be contingent and provisional, not basic and ultimate.” Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2*, 733.

¹⁰² Hans W. Frei, ‘Letter to Gary Comstock, November 5, 1984’, in Frei, *Reading Faithfully*, 37.

possibility, or rationality, is one we cannot know in this present finite state”.¹⁰³ There is, to recall *Identity*, no ‘going behind’ the incarnation here; Christians do not rehearse the narrative of Jesus as God incarnate to signpost some deeper truth behind the specific doctrine, a truth that can be wholly grasped by modernist categories of rationality. Instead, dogmatic and philosophical reflection follows from the grammar of faith as given in the witness to God’s act in Christ, in accordance with the *sensus literalis* described above.

Therefore, theology that broadly fits the description of Type 4 has, at its centre, a theology of the transcendence of Jesus in which his particularity is vital. The transcendence of God—the freedom of God’s activity in the world—is preserved in this type, for theology itself is not understood to be the kind of thing whereby an object is grasped or defined, but rather the kind of thing which understands itself to be speaking of one who precedes it, who transcends it, and upon whose activity theology reflects and to which it responds. Simply, if Christians are speaking about God as Creator and Redeemer, then their theological talk is self-consciously secondary to that divine activity.¹⁰⁴ Christians understand themselves as acted upon and through by God, and recognise that activity as somehow one with the activity of Jesus Christ. Critical theological reflection springs up in response to this Christological belief. The particular shape of the Christian faith, which according to the multifaceted *sensus literalis* of the texts has the transcendent and particular identity of Jesus Christ at its heart, is therefore the map for the employment of external disciplines in Christian theology. Quite simply, Jesus Christ in his transcendent particularity is the reason Christian faith possesses its flexibility. The particular relationship between internal and external, or between theology and philosophy, is as flexible and complex as it is *because of* the particularities of the identity of Jesus who transcends and calls into question our categories of understanding. Christian engagement with academic philosophy is *ad hoc* not according to a pre-conceived theoretical map, but because that is what the Christian faith necessitates by virtue of its own *sensus literalis* and

¹⁰³ Frei, *Types*, 80–81.

¹⁰⁴ Of course, it is possible for those who understand philosophy as foundational for theology (Type 2) to say that they also understand philosophy to be anterior to God’s primary activity, but under such a model it would be hard to suggest that the general categories of a Christian philosophy of God should be prioritised over against the particular narratives God’s activity in the world in Jesus Christ, for the narrative of God’s *specific* activity holds greater weight for the community of faith than the general possibility of that activity being described/apprehended.

practice—in other words, because of the person of Jesus Christ (and, we would add, in union with the Holy Spirit). Type 4 resists the domestication of transcendence, and does so whilst recognising the coherence of transcendence and particularity in the identity of Jesus.

Recalling the question of the ‘middle way’ between closed and wide-open religion as articulated by Ford (see chapter 1) an approach to Jesus’ transcendence derived from Frei’s theology is pertinent for asking how one might avoid theological arrogance or ‘closed-ness’ (often associated with fundamentalist evangelicalism) on the one hand, and non-descriptive banality or ‘wide open-ness’ (often associated with liberalism, which often possesses its fair dose of arrogance too) on the other. *Types* suggests that theology that goes about its business in a ‘type 4 kind of way’ calls into question apologetic attempts to enclose Christian beliefs—most specifically about person of Jesus—inside theories of understanding, and thereby resists the collapse of hermeneutics into epistemology. Modern theologies often endorse that collapse, assuming that epistemology (theories of knowledge) and hermeneutics (theories of meaning) are the same thing.¹⁰⁵ As a result, Christian ‘meaning’ is required to justify itself within general theories of univocal meaning—which Frei calls “a view of certainty and knowledge which liberals and evangelicals hold in common.”¹⁰⁶ At the heart of the potential for something like Type 4 to offer an alternative to closed-ness or wide-openness, therefore, is the recognition that the life of Jesus is the locus for Christian thinking about the transcendence of God and the meaning of Christian language about God in relation to human epistemology.

Frei, though, was cautious in his language about any kind of ‘middle way’ (he wanted to steer clear of “reductionist” and “compromising” anthropological attempts at mediating the universal and the particular elements of religion)¹⁰⁷ and when summarising his theology on this matter we must be aware of his care to avoid demonising either ‘side’ in what might be perceived as a liberal/fundamentalist divide.¹⁰⁸ In the spirit of this caution, DeHart warns against identifying Frei’s

¹⁰⁵ Frei, *Types*, 84.

¹⁰⁶ Frei, ‘Response’, 211.

¹⁰⁷ Hans W. Frei, ‘History, Salvation-History, and Typology’, in Frei, *Reading Faithfully*, 152.

¹⁰⁸ “[W]e need a kind of generous orthodoxy which would have in it an element of liberalism ... and an element of evangelicalism. I don’t know if there is a voice between those two, as a matter of fact. If

typological preferences with a definitive rejection of all liberal theology *per se* in favour of a new ‘post-liberalism’. This, says DeHart, “does not work because it depends on making into a principled opposition what Frei understands as a matter of tactical choice”.¹⁰⁹ DeHart is referring in particular to a tendency to read Frei’s theology as a full forced rejection of any kind of correlation between theology and external disciplines—a rejection which at its extreme end, denies any kind of ‘truth in the world’ because of its unwillingness to engage with philosophical categories at all. Indeed, as DeHart recognises, Frei perceived that Barth’s *ad hoc* subordination approach may, if not approached with care, throw the baby out with the bathwater when it comes to a theological “criteria for intelligibility”.¹¹⁰

We can recall H. Richard Niebuhr’s influence upon Frei to serve as an aid here. Niebuhr’s own approach to a theology of revelation had informed Frei’s concern about a residual epistemological monophysitism in Barth’s early work,¹¹¹ and if we are to heed DeHart’s warning and avoid blacklisting all forms of ‘liberalism’ to the extent that worldly meaning is ‘evacuated’, then it certainly pays to keep Frei’s appreciation of Niebuhr in the foreground. Given the similarities between Frei and Niebuhr—particularly in their desire to do justice to what Frei called “the miraculous penetration of the transhistorical into internal history”¹¹²—a temptation to concentrate upon Barth as Frei’s natural ally should perhaps be tempered by attention to the connections between Frei and Niebuhr.

Overall, we should be wary of the temptation to make Frei’s idea of what theology is do what Frei suggests theology itself cannot do—i.e. put itself ‘in the right’ beyond all

there is, I would like to pursue it. But I have conceded ... that I’m not sure that there *is* a voice between liberalism and evangelicalism.” In the next paragraph Frei also describes himself as “not antiliberal”. Frei, ‘Response’, 208. The consensus of this thesis is that the pursuit of this “voice between” is indeed fruitful (despite Frei’s not being sure if that voice exists) and gives rise to much of what makes Frei’s theology attractive.

¹⁰⁹ DeHart, *Trial*, 217.

¹¹⁰ Hans W. Frei, ‘Barth and Schleiermacher’, in Frei, *Theology and Narrative*, 196. DeHart argues therefore, that Schleiermacher’s ‘Type 3’ approach to *ad hoc* correlation may hold no greater danger than Barth’s subordination: “What if the clash in dogmatic discourse between ‘worldly’ and ‘faithful’ meanings always potentially threatening Schleiermacher’s *ad hoc* correlation were deemed not significantly more dangerous to theology than the opposite risk of an evacuation of all worldly meaning such as haunts a subordinating strategy like Barth’s?” DeHart, *Trial*, 223.

¹¹¹ See also DeHart, *Trial*, 247.

¹¹² Frei, ‘Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr’, 91.

question. Put more philosophically, Frei's theology cannot posit its own infallibility, even something as apparently 'humble' as the infallibility of its own flexibility.¹¹³ To advocate that Frei's flexible, confident and yet humble theology *is* the only right way, ironically fails to allow the character of theology to permeate the understanding theologians have of their own task. What DeHart's work illuminates is not Frei's theology as a forthright alternative to liberal approaches to correlation, but rather Frei's caution when it comes to any kind of systematisation. His approach cannot be methodologically sealed, but, by virtue of its attempt to relate properly to the task of speaking meaningfully about God, retains an incapacity that works out as methodological flexibility in the light of the simultaneous concreteness and ungraspability of Jesus—i.e. Jesus' transcendence in his particularity. It therefore informs a humility but confidence as regards the coexistence of the universal and the particular in Christian faith. A "wise" theologian, suggests Frei, would highlight both

[a] God who endows *all* his human creatures with freedom and preserves his *full* creation from ultimate loss or absurdity; who, on the other, in the fulfillment of that creation as well as its radical redress in the face of evil has focussed his providence in the person of Jesus Christ in whom the reign of God has come near ... A commitment to universalism concerning human destiny and a commitment to the specific of sacred or salvation within it are not in ultimate conflict, even if the manner of their cohesion is hidden.¹¹⁴

ii) Conclusion

A description of Frei's later work has shed further light upon the meaning of the centrality of Jesus Christ for theology—the crucified and risen one who is present in his transcendent particularity. Chapter 2 drew attention to the particular way that historicity and transcendence cohere in a Christology positioned against modernist epistemology, and this latter analysis shows the continuity of that theme in Frei's later work, as well as emphasising the particular Christian community in relationship with Jesus—the historically particular community in relationship with the particular transcendent one. Furthermore, engaging briefly with *Types of Christian Theology*, we

¹¹³ Consider again Frei's phrase from his letter to Comstock: "theology cannot even invest so much in the foundational/anti-foundational debate as to come out (*qua* theology) *in principle* on the anti-foundational side." Frei, 'Letter to Gary Comstock', 37.

¹¹⁴ Frei, 'History', 151–152.

have seen how the kind of Christology Frei develops illuminates another coherence—this time of confident witness to the normativity of Jesus Christ on the one hand, and of flexibility, openness and humility on the other. Simply, the coherence of historicity and transcendence in the identity of Jesus Christ relates to the coherence of confidence and humility in the Christian community.

Summarising Frei's overall theological contribution, David Ford has recognised both these features, speaking of both the "element of incognito" in the "unsubstitutable identity of Jesus Christ, rendered in narrative form"¹¹⁵; and also of "the capacity to generate a generous orthodoxy hospitable to many different methods, philosophies, churches, anthropologies, cultures, periods, etc."¹¹⁶ I have endeavored to highlight how the first is the grounds for the second, in such a way that illuminates how an account of Jesus' transcendence articulated at the level of realistic narrative offers a way between a dichotomy of arrogance and banality.

Ford's attention to this 'element of incognito' in the identity of Christ refers to one of Frei's most exceptionally crafted lectures, 'On the Encounter of Jesus with the German Academy.' Therein, more succinctly than elsewhere, Frei communicates something of the *difficulty* that the identity of Christ presents to us. He begins,

It is frightening to stand behind a lectern or sit in a comfortable seminar room and talk about Jesus Christ. It is incongruous ... He is a very demanding figure—to judge by a large consensus in a long tradition—requiring both our confession of him as Lord and Master and a form of life not indeed heroically reiterative of his own but recognisably shaped in his image even though at the distance of imperfection.¹¹⁷

To describe a crucial aspect of this 'difficulty' in the disciple's relation to Jesus, Frei turns to Kierkegaard, for whom the Jesus of the narratives is met 'fully' only when "we have also met him ... in forgetfulness of himself or incognito in a crowd" and especially insofar as he is met in the "poor, the undeserving, the spiritual and economic underclass",¹¹⁸ with whom Jesus was "self-identified ... though he was

¹¹⁵ David Ford, 'Hans Frei and the Future of Theology', *Modern Theology* (8: 1992), 207.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Frei, 'Encounter', 133.

¹¹⁸ Frei, 'Encounter', 136.

neither identified by nor identical with them.”¹¹⁹ To speak about meeting Christ ‘incognito’ is not to refer to a generalized identity, but a particular concealment. That is, it is not a generalised ‘Jesus-ness’ that is met, but Jesus himself. Such as it is, then, the epistemological incapacity that is characteristic of a Christian’s relationship to Jesus is not merely a theoretical kind, but coincides with a particular form of calling to those on society’s margins.

III

Moving to Bonhoeffer

At this point, reflecting upon coherence of Christ’s incognito with the mystery of meeting Christ in others, it becomes virtually impossible to hold off constructive comparison with Dietrich Bonhoeffer any longer. Not only are both these themes, along with many other aspects of Frei’s theology explored above, present in Bonhoeffer’s thought in strikingly similar ways; but Bonhoeffer’s own reflections upon Kierkegaard’s incognito also promise to take us into a significantly deeper reflection on the particularity of Jesus than Frei does here. Bonhoeffer explores the incognito in the context of a theology of the cross, where, if we want to speak of the transcendence of Jesus, we have to speak about the hiddenness of God in the humiliation of the crucified one. The intensity of this difficulty—grounded as it is in the historically particular event of Jesus of Nazareth’s execution—promises to significantly enhance the reflections we have derived so far from Frei, bringing the inseparability of transcendence and particularity into even sharper focus.¹²⁰ Simultaneously, however, Frei’s sustained attention to the complex way in which historical particularity is central to Christology offers a basis on which Bonhoeffer’s works can be read to their fullest potential. The coming chapters explicate key elements of Bonhoeffer’s thought in relation to what we have already seen of Frei’s, so that their collaborative strength

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Although Frei alludes briefly to an ecclesiology grounded in a *theologia crucis* in an ordination sermon in 1954 (“[E]ven if there be deep scars in the creation, the church, like her Lord, bears them in her body.” Hans W. Frei, ‘On Priesthood, the Past, and Peace’, in Frei, *Reading Faithfully*, 199) this is by no means a sustained reflection in the same way as it is for Bonhoeffer.

is illuminated, particularly in reference to a theology of the transcendence of Jesus which makes for a coherence of humility and confidence in Christian theology, countering closed or wide-open extremes.

Chapter 5.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER: MODERNITY AND TRANSCENDENCE

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 in Breslau—coincidentally the same town where Hans Frei would be born sixteen years later—into a large, upper middle class Lutheran family that was stable and secure, yet hit hard by the death of Bonhoeffer's older brother Walter in the First World War. Having declared as a young man to his surprised family he would pursue the career of a theologian,¹ Bonhoeffer began his theological education in Tübingen in 1923, before moving to study in Berlin in 1924, where he worked under Adolph von Harnack and Reinhold Seeberg. His doctoral dissertation was accepted in 1927, and after a year as curate in Barcelona from February 1928, he returned to Berlin where his *Habilitationschrift* was accepted in 1930. He spent a post-graduate year at Union Theological Seminary in the U.S., before being ordained a Lutheran pastor in 1931 in Berlin, and then combining academic work at the faculty with pastoral service. Though deeply involved in the 'church struggle' during the rise of Nazism in Germany,² Bonhoeffer left for London for two years in 1933 to pastor two churches, during which time he was also involved in significant ecumenical work directed against Nazism, especially as regards the church struggle. In 1935, he returned to Germany to lead two illegal seminaries for the Confessing Church which were closed in 1937, and after a period of 'underground' teaching, and a brief visit to New York to avoid conscription, Bonhoeffer returned again to Germany to participate in the resistance by joining the *Abwehr*—a senior counter-intelligence agency for whom he pursued important ecumenical contacts overseas and aided the smuggling of Jews out of Germany. In 1943, Bonhoeffer was arrested by the Gestapo and imprisoned in Berlin. In 1945, after the exposure of a failed plot to assassinate Hitler that implicated Bonhoeffer and some of his *Abwehr* colleagues, he was transferred to Buchenwald concentration camp in 1945, and executed for treason at Flossenbergr on 9th April that year.

¹ See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Contemporary* (London: Collins, 1970), 22.

² See especially Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ch. 7.

Here I position Bonhoeffer's early work—his doctoral dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* and his *Habilitationschrift, Act and Being*—in relation to Placher's narrative of the domestication of transcendence, therefore paralleling the way Frei was introduced in the first part of chapter 3.³ Like Frei, Bonhoeffer aims to counteract a modernist epistemological relativisation of transcendence epitomised by Culture Protestantism,⁴ and furthermore his approach to Karl Barth's contribution to a theology of transcendence follows remarkably similar lines to Frei's critique of 'epistemological monophysitism'. Whilst enthusiastically commending Barth's determination to subvert the domestication of transcendence, in *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer simultaneously critiques the extent to which Barth fails to 'ground' revelation historically. As a result, Bonhoeffer's understanding of the relationship between Christology and transcendence, like Frei's, points to the importance of Jesus' historical particularity.

Bonhoeffer's early work responds to the domestication of transcendence by critiquing the foundational principles of nineteenth century liberal 'Cultural Protestant' theology from within its midst.⁵ Adolph von Harnack, who spearheaded the Berlin faculty, epitomised liberal Protestantism, emphasising the priority "freedom of thought and the pursuit of truth on every path it took".⁶ Bonhoeffer always admired Harnack, especially concerning this emphasis upon freedom,⁷ yet the latter's theology propounds that which Bonhoeffer robustly critiques—namely a "confidence in the

³ The general point about Bonhoeffer and transcendence is well attested in Bonhoeffer scholarship, and as such much of the below is merely a redescription. For a few examples, see Michael P. DeJonge, 'Bonhoeffer from the Perspective of Intellectual History', in Clifford Green and Guy Carter (eds.), *Interpreting Bonhoeffer: Historical Perspectives, Emerging Issues* (Fortress, Minneapolis, 2013), 201; Ray S. Anderson, *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1976), 76–77; Stewart R. Sutherland, 'Ethics and Transcendence in Bonhoeffer', *Scottish Journal of Theology* (30, 1997), 543–554; and Rainer Mayer, 'Christology: The Genuine Form of Transcendence', in A. J. Klassen, *A Bonhoeffer Legacy: Essays in Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981). The connection with Frei, however, appears yet unexplored in any detail, and thus the redescription below is a necessary stage for the connection to be made.

⁴ On the use of the phrase 'Culture Protestantism' to describe that to which Bonhoeffer objects, see Barry Harvey, *Taking Hold of the Real: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Profound Worldliness of Christianity* (Oregon: Cascade, 2015), 160–162. Harvey actually uses 'cultural Protestantism', but the implied meaning is the same.

⁵ See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 44–46.

⁶ Martin Rumscheidt, 'The formation of Bonhoeffer's theology', in John W. de Gruchy (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 54.

⁷ See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'Eulogy for Adolph von Harnack', in *BBNT*, 380; and Martin Rumscheidt, 'Harnack, Seeberg and Bonhoeffer', in Peter Frick (ed.), *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 211.

human spirit ... competence and authority of the power of thinking, and trust in the ability of human beings to transcend their subjectivity in the endeavor to reach true objectivity.”⁸ In contrast, *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being* largely follow Barth’s protest against Protestant liberal theology, critiquing any attempt by human beings to place themselves into relationship with God in Christ. Human beings, Bonhoeffer emphasises, are placed into truth and into relationship with God *by* God, not by their own culturally liberated thought. In Anderson’s terms again, human beings are the objects of God’s transcendent activity towards them in history, specifically in Jesus Christ, by virtue of which they are placed into relationship with one another and with God. Standing in the midst of the contemporary academic crisis of transcendence—by no means, of course, the most intense crisis out of which he will write—Bonhoeffer gives us the basis for a theology of Jesus’ transcendence.

I

Sanctorum Communio

Bonhoeffer’s doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio* (written in 1927, published in 1930) expounds the identity and structure of the church as a community given and held in its identity by God in Christ and the Holy Spirit. Firstly, I will observe how, in contrast to an enlightenment turn to the individual subject, Bonhoeffer highlights both the radical decentering and an ultimate affirmation of the ‘I’ that occur in true community with others and with God. Simply, I am given my individuality (my ‘I’) by the other person who is *given* by God, not by myself. Through this other person in community with me, I can encounter God, even though their identity is not reducible to a *means* by which God is encountered, nor collapsed into God’s own being.

Secondly, because he believes God gives this community by giving Godself in Christ, Bonhoeffer summarises his ecclesiology as “Christ existing as church-community”.⁹ In the church-community (*Gemeinde*) God in Christ exists for and towards me in the other, and therefore towards and for the other in me. Christians are enabled to love one another as Christ loves, able to be Christ to one another precisely because of *God’s*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *SC*, 121.

love in Christ. In *Sanctorum Communio*, therefore, Bonhoeffer emphasises that the church, and the individual therein, are constituted from beyond themselves—participating in the free and distinct activity of God in Christ.¹⁰

i) *Sociality and the individual*

Bonhoeffer recognises that the individual subject is fundamentally constituted from outside itself. His theological anthropology destabilises any kind of individualistic subjectivity, but in doing so stabilises the concept of the individual *per se*. Despite being initially *de-centered*, the ‘I’ is then truly validated insofar as the individual is constituted through the other person and ultimately God.

In a sweeping historical summary of the concept of the individual, Bonhoeffer says that Aristotelianism, Stoicism and Epicureanism resolve the individual into the generalities of reason, ethics and pleasure respectively, each variously negating any concept of real social relation.¹¹ Bonhoeffer’s primary critique, though, is directed towards an enlightenment concept of person, wherein “the knowing-I becomes the starting point of all philosophy”.¹² He positions himself especially in relation to Kant (whose epistemological model is described in more detail below) who, he says, “fundamentally denies the person by subsuming the person under the universal”;¹³ and Hegel, in whose work the I is resolved into Absolute Spirit, losing its ‘limit’—its identity as one and not another.¹⁴

¹⁰ On the continuity of Bonhoeffer’s theology in *Sanctorum Communio* with the participatory tradition, see Jens Zimmerman, ‘Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Heidegger: Two Different Visions of Humanity’, in Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmerman (eds.), *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought: Cruciform Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 103; and Justin Mandela Roberts, *Sacred Rhetoric: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Participatory Tradition* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 23.

¹¹ SC, 36–40. In Aristotelianism human beings only become persons insofar as they participate in the species of reason” (36). Stoicism subordinates the person to a universally valid “higher imperative”, through obedience to which, “each soul ... is of like nature with eternal reason and thus also with the soul of other persons” (37). Epicureanism values only the individual pleasure of fundamentally “alien and dissimilar” persons (38–39).

¹² SC, 40.

¹³ SC, 41.

¹⁴ “Hegel ... has the I arise at the point where, drawn into objective spirit, it is returned to absolute spirit, a move that also overcomes in principle the limit of the individual person.” SC, 42.

In contrast to this, Bonhoeffer wants to develop an “ethical” concept of the person rather than a “metaphysical” one.¹⁵ By metaphysical, he means a concept of the person defined without any mediation from any other; whereas “the ethical concept of the person is a definition based on ethical-social interaction.”¹⁶ The *freedom* of the other person forms a “real barrier”¹⁷ to my intellect (myself as the thinking subject) and in doing so awakens me to ethical responsibility towards the ‘you’. The other person is utterly free in relation to me, and without their freedom I cannot be awakened to full humanity. To relativise this freedom would produce a deficient anthropology, imprisoned in the “abstract and metaphysical”¹⁸ and closed to the concrete fullness of life. The implication, therefore, is that genuine humanity requires an epistemological *incapacity* in relation to the other.

Theologically, this incapacity is grounded in the created-ness of the other person—i.e. in their given-ness by God. In his interpretation of Genesis 1–3 (*Creation and Fall*) Bonhoeffer outlines a concept of creatureliness as that can help to supplement our reading of *Sanctorum Communio*. There, he rephrases what we have already noted, saying,

The human being is not alone ... and it is in this *dependence upon one another that their creatureliness exists*. The creatureliness of human beings ... can be defined in simply no other way than in terms of the existence of human beings over-against-one-another, with-one-another, and in-dependence-upon-one-another.¹⁹

Furthermore, though, this being over-against, with, and dependent upon, is a relation that is given to, rather than constituted by, humankind. Arguing that humankind’s likeness to God consists not in an *analogia entis* but in an *analogia relationis*, Bonhoeffer ultimately recognises that humankind’s freedom to relate to one another and thus constitute one another, is a freedom that resides primordially in God. The relationship

¹⁵ *SC*, 50.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *SC*, 46.

¹⁸ *SC*, 49.

¹⁹ *CF*, 64. Taking into account a broad doctrine of creation, and especially the pressing need for contemporary theology to be mindful of environmental ethics, one can suggest that a rehearsal of this position today should also highlight how human beings depend not only upon other human beings, but other creatures, and creation in general.

of human beings to one another is “not a human potential or possibility or structure of human existence; instead it is a given relation, a relation in which human beings are set, a *justitia passiva*!”²⁰ Therefore, “the relation of creature with creature is a relation established by God, because it consists of freedom and freedom comes from God.”²¹

God as the primordial divine other therefore grounds—or more actively, *gives*—the connection between the ‘other’ (the You) and the ‘I’. The ‘You’, in ethical relationship to whom my concrete ‘I’ is constituted, is ‘who they are’ by virtue of being given by God.²² This means the other person cannot simply be *identified* with God, nor can their other-ness consist of the same ‘thing’ as God’s otherness. God’s wholly-other-ness and otherness of the person as ethical subject are distinct, but the former is the origin, the transcendent *giver*, of the latter. “The other person is only a ‘You’ insofar as God brings it about.”²³ They have their origin in God’s free *creatio ex nihilo*—giving purely out of free love, bound to nothing immanent. As Roberts puts it,

This coming-to-be of personhood in the I-You relation is not merely a natural coincidence, a kind of awkward meeting of like kind in a cluttered cosmos. God in the condition and possibility of human consciousness, transcendently comprising a ‘You’ layer ... the individual and the community have a radical passivity about them.²⁴

Furthermore, the encounter with God through the other person is not about their ‘usability’—as if they were a *means* by which to encounter God—but about the way in which they have their beginning and end in God just as I have mine. It is about something shared, rather than something possessed. Bonhoeffer’s concept of person is therefore firmly opposed to any attempt to ‘domesticate’ the other inside the boundaries of the individual’s use of reason. Furthermore, this insistence upon

²⁰ *CF*, 65.

²¹ *CF*, 66.

²² *SC*, 55. Bonhoeffer thus perceives a subtlety not evident in, for example, David Ratke’s argument that “God is a subject. The upshot of this is that we encounter God as we encounter any other living being ... We can know our friends, our husbands, wives, parents, and children insofar as we know the external reality of them and in so far as they allow themselves to be known. So it is with God.” David C. Ratke, ‘Preaching Christ Crucified: Luther and the Revelation of God’, *Dialog* (43: 2004), 273.

²³ *SC*, 55.

²⁴ Roberts, *Sacred*, 37. By “radical passivity”, Roberts means “at the very depth of consciousness, constituted by an I-You relation, there is an *actus* of divine consciousness in which humanity participates.” Roberts, *Sacred*, 37, n.25.

exteriority is fundamentally theological, not merely anthropological. The otherness of the other person, in relation to which my ethical responsibility is developed, is grounded in the true otherness—the undomesticated transcendence—of God. Only because of one wholly beyond us, yet towards us in the act of creation whereby we are constituted by the gift of the other as ‘you’, can each of us truly be an ‘I’.

ii) *Society and community; God and church*

Bonhoeffer draws upon Ferdinand Tönnies’ distinction between community and society to articulate his ecclesiology. Tönnies outlined two ways of understanding the relationship of human wills to one another, which, he says, can be “conceived of either as real and organic life—this is the essential characteristic of the *Gemeinschaft* (community); or as imaginary and mechanical structure—this is the concept of *Gesellschaft* (society)”.²⁵ Bonhoeffer believes in particular that the notion of *Gesellschaft* must be rejected by ecclesiology, because it trades on what we can call a domesticated concept of the other person.

Gesellschaft, says Bonhoeffer, cannot sustain the concept of person described above because it is,

an association of rational action [which] ... appeals to human beings’ ability to use their reason most effectively, as demonstrated in the search for the most appropriate means to a willed purpose, and in using the society itself extensively to this end ... Moreover, the other person must be treated with utmost consideration, precisely in order to be used to full advantage.²⁶

Reflecting Kant’s rejection of ‘means-ends’ as a basis for moral action, Bonhoeffer objects to the view of persons as means to an end, because, once more, that interiorises their meaning in relation to me and whatever ends I might wish to pursue, neutralising the ethical character of the other as ‘barrier’ or ‘limit’.²⁷ An association of rational action cannot, therefore, sustain a proper concept of person. It fundamentally

²⁵ Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society*, trans. Hollis (Cambridge, CUP, 2001), 33.

²⁶ *SC*, 90.

²⁷ Re Kant, see J. B. Schneewind, ‘Autonomy, obligation, and virtue: An overview of Kant’s moral philosophy’, in Paul Guyer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Kant* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), 319.

dehumanises, erasing the notion of the other as created gift that is embedded in the concept of person described above.²⁸

Gemeinschaft, on the other hand is not something that has come into being for the purpose of pursuing an end external to itself, but is *willed* for its own sake. Thus, even though the church is “organized toward a certain end, namely the achievement of God’s will”,²⁹ that will is realised purely insofar as the church is itself—and it is itself only insofar as it receives itself from God.

[The] divine will is directed toward the church itself as a community of spirit, so that as a purposive society it is at the same time an end in itself ... God, in seeking to implement the divine will, gives God’s own self into our hearts and creates community; that is, God makes the divine self the means to God’s own end.³⁰

Therefore, the church transcends a dichotomy of means and ends by virtue of the fact that God in Godself constitutes its existence. Bonhoeffer expresses this ontological ecclesiology in the phrase “Christ-existing-as-community”,³¹ which points not to a diffusion of the particular identity of Christ into the many people that make up the church, but rather points to the church’s constitution from beyond itself. Christ, Bonhoeffer is clear, is both the head of and exterior to the church, whilst also being in the church as the one who constitutes it.³²

The church is ‘Christ existing as community’ by virtue of the work of the Holy Spirit, who actualises that which God establishes in giving Godself to the world in Jesus

²⁸ In *Life Together* (Bonhoeffer’s reflections on Christian community arising from his time leading the Confessing Church seminary at Finkenwalde) Bonhoeffer says, “the community of Christians is a gift of grace from the Kingdom of God.” *LT*, 30. For more on Finkenwalde, see Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ch.10.

²⁹ *SC*, 261.

³⁰ *SC*, 261–262. The social and sociological are “presupposed and included in revelation. Only in this perspective can they be fully understood.” *SC*, 65. As Barry Harvey notes, this calls into question readings of Bonhoeffer that profess sociality as the primary basis for his ecclesiology (e.g. Green, *Bonhoeffer*, 19). Harvey rightly recognises the priority of revelation in Bonhoeffer’s thought and thus the priority of ecclesiology over sociality *per se*. See Barry Harvey, ‘Sociality, Ecclesiology, and the Polyphony of Life in the Thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’, in Jens Zimmerman and Brian Gregor (eds.), *Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Social Thought* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2010), 102–105.

³¹ *SC*, 121, 189–190.

³² *SC*, 137–139. The relation of Christ to the church-community is therefore “both ‘communal’ and ‘governing’”. *SC*, 147.

Christ, who himself acts on behalf of humanity for humanity's redemption. Regarding this 'acting on behalf of', Bonhoeffer describes Christ's 'vicarious representative action' (*Stellvertretung*) and recognises that this is "fundamental for the church-community ... [as] the life-principle of the new humanity."³³ As the "one who represents the whole of humanity in his historical life", Jesus the crucified and risen one both constitutes the new humanity, and establishes the principle of acting vicariously for the other at its heart.³⁴ Thus, as Christiane Tietz summarises, 'Christ existing as community',

describes what takes place concretely when one church member becomes *Christ to the other*. It is when we become Christ to the other in the church community that then Christ is present. This occurs in the *structure* of being with-each-other and in the *action* of being for-each-other.³⁵

Furthermore, with the *Stellvertretung* of Christ—his rejection and death undergone on our behalf, and his resurrection that makes for our life—constituting the way in the church is Christ existing as community, Bonhoeffer's early ecclesiology not only emphasises that the church receives its being from outside of itself, but hints at how the *historical* life of Christ, narrated in the gospels, is at the heart of this constitution of the church by the Spirit.³⁶

Crucially then, the church's concrete, historical existence is grounded in exteriority. Here the fundamental theological rationale is the same as that discussed above regarding 'I' and 'You'—namely, that human beings cannot independently orient themselves epistemologically in relation to themselves, God or one another. In this case, the meaning of the church is not found in a universally accessible reason, or

³³ SC, 146–147.

³⁴ *Ibid.* Root interprets *Stellvertretung* as "place sharing", which in Christological terms, has the benefit of emphasising that Jesus represents humanity from within. Root also uses this translation to drive a model for pastoral ministry. Andrew Root, *Bonhoeffer as Youth Worker: A Theological Vision for Discipleship and Life Together* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 43.

³⁵ Christiane Tietz, 'Bonhoeffer on the Ontological Structure of the Church', in Adam C. Clark and Michael Mawson (eds.), *Ontology and Ethics: Bonhoeffer and Contemporary Scholarship* (Oregon: Pickwick, 2013), 41. Tietz rightly positions herself strongly against any metaphysical implication that the community simply becomes Jesus Christ, or that "Christ is existing *in* the church community and nowhere else (i.e. as some of the death of God theologians have maintained." Tietz, 'Ontological Structure', 40. See below, n.111, for a comparison of this view with Ray Anderson's criticism of Bonhoeffer's theology of transcendence and community in both *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being*.

³⁶ SC, 147. We will see this much more clearly in the Christology Lectures of 1933, below.

humanity's best efforts to form a society that enables pure religious faith, but in the free gift of God towards the world in Christ—a transcendent gift that cannot be domesticated by a delimited concept of universal reason.³⁷ Recalling the 'confessional context' in which Frei's theology resides (chapter 3) we recognise along with Tietz that, for Bonhoeffer, "what the church is can only be understood by believing its premise."³⁸ In the context of *fides quaerens intellectum*, Bonhoeffer articulates that the church receives its being from Christ, and participates in Christ's being for others by virtue of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

These two brief examples—a radical displacement of the 'I', and a recognition of the limitations of modernist epistemology and morality as regards the free gift of God in Christ—therefore demonstrate that from his earliest published work, Bonhoeffer's theological rationale fits with a critique of the domesticated transcendence that characterised the Culture Protestantism of the Berlin faculty. We can also discern Bonhoeffer's awareness of the importance of both the centrality of Jesus' particularity, and also the particularity of the church, although these will develop more as his work continues. Whilst the prominence of pneumatology evident here fades somewhat as Bonhoeffer's work develops—an issue addressed in the final chapter—at this stage in his career, he also uses pneumatological language freely, allowing more easily than Frei the recognition that the relation between Christ and the church (a relation which Bonhoeffer articulates more ontologically than Frei) has the work of the Spirit at its heart.

II

Act and Being

Bonhoeffer's early Christological response to domesticated transcendence is brought into sharper focus in *Act and Being* (1930). This section briefly describes his argument, so that in the following chapter it will be clear that Bonhoeffer's *theologia crucis* (examined in chapters 6 and 7) is built upon very similar critical perceptions as Frei's.

³⁷ "Christian community is not an ideal we have to realize, but rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate." *LT*, 38.

³⁸ Tietz, 'Ontological Structure', 35.

In *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer is interested in the formation of “genuine theological concepts”,³⁹ and in particular how different ways of conceiving the relationship between ‘act’ and ‘being’ affects this formation. He examines and subsequently rejects *philosophical* approaches to the question of revelation, on the grounds that they collapse into a domestication of transcendence in which humankind merely posits its own meaning. He therefore insists that a theology of revelation—i.e. theology based on “something disclosed or given to be known to someone which apart from the act of revealing would remain hidden, disguised and unknown”,⁴⁰ or what Gorringer simply refers to as “what we cannot tell ourselves”⁴¹—is necessary for the formation of any genuine theological concept. Next, he explores how divergent *theological* approaches to the categories of act and being give rise to a variety of theologies of revelation. Having cast the problem into relief, he posits his own theological concept of the union of act and being in the person of Christ.

Bonhoeffer’s Christological approach to a theology of revelation emphasises not just the transcendence of God in Christ, but also the centrality of historicity in revelation, thereby articulating a simultaneous appreciation and critique of Barth that complements Frei neatly. Bonhoeffer, we will see, could have deployed the critical phrase ‘epistemological monophysitism’ in relation to Barth’s early work just as convincingly as Frei did, for Frei’s phrase essentially summarises something with which Bonhoeffer was equally concerned.

In particular, this section follows Michael DeJonge’s focus upon Bonhoeffer’s engagement with Barth on the issues of revelation and transcendence, and his attention to the importance of Bonhoeffer’s Lutheran context for understanding the way *Act and Being* develops. DeJonge argues that even though Bonhoeffer embraced Barth’s critique of modernist epistemology, and his constructive theology of revelation grounded in God’s subjectivity as opposed to God’s objectivity,⁴² it was the former’s

³⁹ *AB*, 27.

⁴⁰ Trevor Hart, ‘Revelation’, in John Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 37.

⁴¹ Timothy J. Gorringer, *Discerning Spirit: A Theology of Revelation* (London: SCM, 1990), 71.

⁴² “Barth ... faults theology for treating humans as the subjects in the story of theology, in the relationship between God and humanity. If humans are the subjects, thinks Barth, it follows quite

Lutheran convictions as much as any philosophical sensibility that led to his dissatisfaction with the apparent lack of historicity or continuity in Barth. It is primarily on this confessional basis, says DeJonge, that Bonhoeffer posited a “*person* concept of revelation” which orients “both to transcendence and history”.⁴³

The critical sections of *Act and Being* are divided into two categories: Part A enquires into philosophical approaches to the question of act and being; Part B enquires into theological ones. Bonhoeffer then subdivides each of these categories themselves. Part A considers ‘transcendental’ then ‘ontological’ attempts to answer the question of act and being. Part B considers ‘act concepts’ then ‘being concepts’ of revelation, before beginning to articulate Bonhoeffer’s own ecclesiological-Christology that is continued in Part C. Regarding Part A, Paul Janz argues that despite the impression Bonhoeffer gives in his introduction, each *philosophical* subdivision is concerned with a different way of approaching the *relation between* act and being, rather than outlining epistemological theories concerned purely with one (act) or the other (being). Thus, as far as philosophy is concerned, the ‘transcendental’ section concerns “the attempt of *thinking* (act) to understand the pre-theoretical *thinking being* out of which thinking proceeds, or which is the condition for its possibility”; and the ‘ontological’ section concerns “the attempt of thinking (act) to understand the being of that into which thinking enquires outside of itself.”⁴⁴ Part B of the book, however, is more clearly divided in terms of theologies of revelation conceived in terms of act on one hand, and those conceived in terms of being on the other, and as we shall see, there is a sense in which the act theologies converge with the ‘transcendental attempt’ and the being theologies with the ‘ontological attempt’.⁴⁵

naturally that God is the object ... God is not free and transcendent but comes under the power of the knowing subject ... Bonhoeffer follows Barth in recognizing that the problem of transcendence demonstrates the inadequacy of objective concepts of God, and requires theology to rethink the concept of God.” Michael P. DeJonge, ‘Bonhoeffer from the Perspective of Intellectual History’, in Green and Carter, *Interpreting Bonhoeffer*, 199–200.

⁴³ DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer’s*, 7.

⁴⁴ Paul D. Janz, *God, the Mind’s Desire: Reference, Reason and Christian Thinking* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), 105–6.

⁴⁵ Janz writes of “the erroneous conclusion that the ‘transcendental attempt’ has mainly to do with the ‘act’ part of the book and the ‘ontological attempt’ with the ‘being part of the book.” Janz, *God*, 105. This therefore counters DeJonge’s assessment that Bonhoeffer’s Part A does indeed deal with act- and being-*philosophies* in turn, precisely in order to prepare the ground for the theological assessment of act- and being-*theologies* of revelation, and Bonhoeffer’s own constructive alternative. DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer’s*, 21–22. Granting Janz’s point that what Bonhoeffer actually embarks upon in Part A is indeed an

i) *Part A: Philosophical issues*

a) *Kant and transcendentalism*

In the first section of Part A, Bonhoeffer is interested in philosophy that emphasises the thinking act of the individual subject, directed towards gaining an understanding of itself as subject (i.e. its own being) and this leads him to engage with the philosophical revolution of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Despite not featuring significantly in Placher's thesis (see chapter 2) Kant's relationship to the enlightenment question of transcendence is singularly noteworthy, insofar as he revolutionised the relationship between the human thinker and the 'transcendent', whilst retaining the enlightenment drive towards positioning theology within the framework of universal human reason. Bonhoeffer recognises something important in Kant's thinking that has the potential to hold on to a genuine (*echten*) transcendence, but ultimately assesses Kant as collapsing epistemology back into the 'I' such that the transcendent has little relevance.

Kant's epistemology revolved around the experience of the self, the relationship between *noumena* (things) and *phenomena* (the experience of things) and therefore question of what knowledge 'is'. His revolution was to argue that the mind is "active" rather than "passive" in relation to that which it seeks to know.⁴⁶ Kant described how a subject always makes an impression upon the object about which they think. As a result, 'the thing-in-itself' (*Das Ding an Sich*) can never be apprehended 'purely' by reason:

investigation into the *relation*, Bonhoeffer himself nevertheless claims that in theologies of revelation as 'act', "the problem of transcendental philosophy presents itself anew" (*AB*, 85) and also that theologies of revelation as 'being' oppose that transcendental attempt, and cohere more naturally with the ontological epistemologies discussed in Part B. Therefore there is a coherence, in Bonhoeffer's own understanding of the problem, between the transcendental attempt and 'act', and between the ontological attempt and 'being'. *AB*, 103–104. This difference notwithstanding, Janz and DeJonge both recognise the key point that neither a transcendental/act or ontological/being attempt at epistemology are satisfactory in relation to transcendence, as they result in "orienting thinking and ultimately the world around the self." DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer's*, 32.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

There can be no modes of knowledge, no connection or unity of one mode of knowledge with another, without that unity of consciousness that precedes all data of intuitions, and by relation to which representation of objects is alone possible. This pure original unchangeable consciousness I shall name *transcendental apperception*.⁴⁷

By thinking about something, I affect my perception of that thing, and going beyond this fundamental subject-object relationship is impossible. In this aspect of Kant's thought, as Bonhoeffer puts it, "the resistance of transcendence to thinking is upheld"⁴⁸ insofar as the mind never grasps that which is beyond itself, because the *act* of the mind upon that which it considers is a determining factor. Far from delivering all power to the thinking act, the upshot of this is that the thing-in-itself can never actually be known independently. Knowing therefore, does not duplicate reality *per se*, but always yields a particular rendering of it inseparable from the limits of the act of subjective thinking.⁴⁹ True knowledge of that which is beyond us is hidden, and transcendence, positively, remains.⁵⁰ If Kant's transcendental attempt at epistemology were to remain here, it could preserve a posture of humility before the transcendent—in theological terms, leaving room for a posture of worship.

Bonhoeffer's insight, however, is that there will always be two 'poles' of transcendence in Kant's subjectivity, because when the subject (the 'I') asks/thinks about itself, the 'I' both precedes and follows the thinking act.⁵¹ The 'I' is already there as that which is thinking, and also that which is apprehended (or rather not apprehended) through the thinking act. In spatial terms, "human existence is always out in front of human

⁴⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Kemp Smith (London: MacMillan, 1929), 136.

⁴⁸ *AB*, 35.

⁴⁹ *AB*, 37.

⁵⁰ Janz assesses Kant's influence on Bonhoeffer positively, describing how "it is precisely *this* world—in which we find ourselves *causally* susceptible and conditioned as *sensibly embodied beings*—that for Kant provides *the* most fundamental 'critical limit' for discursive reason ... Kantian philosophy limits any claims by reason to be able to assert ultimate jurisdiction over sensibly embodied reality, and shows to the contrary that thinking must always self-critically 'leave room' for the empirical reality that challenges and confronts thinking on its own causal terms." Paul D. Janz, 'Bonhoeffer, This-Worldliness, and the Limits of Phenomenology', in Gregor and Zimmerman, *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought*, 56–57. Nevertheless, this does not mitigate Bonhoeffer's recognition that Kant can only serve a purpose up to a point, given his lack of a positive account of revelation.

⁵¹ *AB*, 39. Janz, *God*, 108.

beings, but already behind them at every time”.⁵² As regards the question of transcendence, this pans out into two broad epistemological options.

The first option is to acknowledge an implicit “self-limitation.”⁵³ Despite preserving the truly transcendent, this ultimately ushers one into an epistemological cul-de-sac, because “this something transcendent cannot prove itself to be genuinely transcendent”, and therefore “Kant’s original conception comes to naught.”⁵⁴ Incapacity there may be, but there is no positive correlate to that—no exteriority of the transcendent in relation to the thinking subject. We have the *possibility* of the transcendent but nothing more—nothing which encounters humanity; no revelation.⁵⁵ As Hoff puts it, with Kant the truly transcendent God “evaporates into an empty concept”.⁵⁶ Indeed, Kant himself argues that religion is only meaningful insofar as it can be resolved into practical moral instruction, such that “our concern is not so much to know what [God] is in himself (his nature) but what he is for us as moral beings.”⁵⁷ Kant resolves everything on the side of reason, thereby depositing the transcendent over the other side of an epistemological barrier and making the idea of faith and trust in God a functional “moral obligation”;⁵⁸ and interprets the particulars of the Christian faith as meaningful only insofar as they point to a ‘universal’ moral religion.

[E]very church erected on statutory laws can be the true church only to the extent that it contains within itself a principle of constantly coming closer to

⁵² *AB*, 38.

⁵³ *AB*, 39.

⁵⁴ *AB*, 49.

⁵⁵ *AB*, 52–54.

⁵⁶ Johannes Hoff, ‘The Rise and Fall of the Kantian Paradigm of Modern Theology’, in Conor Cunningham and Peter M. Chandler (eds.), *The Grandeur of Reason: Religion, Tradition and Universalism* (London: SCM, 2010), 186.

⁵⁷ Immanuel Kant, ‘Religion within the boundaries of mere reason’ (1793), in Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, edited by Wood and Giovanni (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), 165. Kant’s phrase “for us as moral beings” should be distinguished from the Lutheran emphasis on Christ’s *pro me* (expounded in the following chapter). For Kant, the emphasis is not, as Tanner puts it, upon “the character and consequences of God’s action in Christ, but a general theological principle about conditions for proper talk about or belief in God—for example, a principle that makes subjective appropriation one such condition.” Kathryn Tanner, ‘Jesus Christ’, in Colin Gunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), 253.

⁵⁸ Hoff, ‘The Rise’, 186.

the pure faith of religion ... and of eventually being able to dispense with the ecclesiastical faith (in its historical aspect).⁵⁹

Kant therefore subordinates human religious practice, and in particular that which purports to relate the human being to God who is beyond reason, to what he calls 'natural religion' that guides the moral disposition, making for cohesive moral society by motivating us towards becoming pleasing to God. The particularity of Christian faith and praxis is subordinated to this more universal and 'practical' religion, which has human reason as its most reliable guide:

[U]niversal human reason must be recognized and honored as supreme commanding principle in a natural religion within the Christian doctrine of faith.⁶⁰

Despite what Bonhoeffer recognises as something genuinely transcendent being preserved in a 'pure Kantianism', this practically oriented resolution back into human reason subjugates God, and the doctrine of revelation, to rationality. Therefore, whilst Kant does not perform a 'domestication' of transcendence in the same univocal terms as Placher describes, the effect of his epistemology remains one which disallows any true relationship of humanity to God who acts towards us as one who is wholly other.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Kant, 'Religion', 176.

⁶⁰ Kant, 'Religion', 186.

⁶¹ Christopher Insole has recently argued, rather more critically, that there is not really the possibility of 'genuine' divine transcendence in Kant at all, but that Kant's "aversion to heteronomy" leads him to "[locate] divinity exhaustively *within our rational willing* and not outside of it." Christopher J. Insole, 'A Thomistic Reading of Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*: Searching for the Unconditioned', in *Modern Theology* (31: 2015), 288–289. Kant, suggests Insole, believes that God cannot be the "unconditioned and good-without-limit external object for our practical reason and will", because God is "external and heteronomous" and therefore "constrains the creature's true and perfect freedom." Insole, 'Thomistic Reading', 298. The theological tradition "says 'yes' to heteronomy, when, and only when, the 'other' is God" (*Ibid.*) but Kant refuses this heteronomy altogether, and although he retains a "theological shape", the 'divine', for Kant is human beings as they "become pure reason". Insole, 'Thomistic Reading', 310–11. Therefore, Insole suggests that rather than depositing God over the far side of human epistemology, Kant in effect replaces God within human rationality. Further in depth critical work on the relationship between Bonhoeffer and Kant would need to take account of Insole's suggestions, but my own focus here is on how Bonhoeffer's own reading of Kant contributes to his Christological alternative to a domesticated transcendence, rather than on whether Bonhoeffer has in fact read Kant right.

In the second option for Kant's epistemological revolution—*idealism*—the I “simply becomes the point of departure instead of the limit-point of philosophy.”⁶² Everything is enclosed in the circular movement where the ‘I’ is both the subject and the object. This collapses the distinction between transcendental apperception and the thing-in-itself. Theologically, idealism implies that “the movement of the spirit is turned in upon itself, and Bonhoeffer modifies Luther’s terminology about human sinfulness to refer to this as “*ratio in se ipsam incurve* [reason turned in upon itself]”.⁶³ Idealism therefore also fails to offer any kind of genuine transcendence; it understands the world purely ‘through me’ rather than the ‘in relation to me’.⁶⁴ As DeJonge summarises, “this kind of self-understanding suits only a monistic, isolated self that lacks a connection to the outside world.”⁶⁵

Two problems are evident, therefore. Firstly, there is the problem of historical reality. Idealism as described here is located wholly within my own consciousness, and therefore occurs in isolation from the continuity of life in the world. Thus idealism stands in opposition to Bonhoeffer’s point in *Sanctorum Communio*, that the ‘I’ is constituted in historical relation with the ‘You’ who encounters me from without (see part I, above). Secondly, we have the theological problem of an epistemology that defines God ‘from inside itself’, objectifying God in the process:

idealistic philosophical reflection implies the system in which God’s own self resides ... I discover God in my coming to myself; I become aware of myself. I find myself—that is, I find God.⁶⁶

God is thus resolved into the act of thinking subject and thereby into the thinking subject itself, yet with no continuity and no encounter with the other. Only a concept

⁶² AB, 39.

⁶³ AB, 41. On Bonhoeffer’s modification of Luther’s phrase, see Christiane Tietz, ‘Bonhoeffer on the Uses and Limits of Philosophy’, in Gregor and Zimmerman, *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought*, 43.n.9. Beyond the issue of a technical misquote, the fact that Bonhoeffer harnesses Luther’s phraseology here highlights how he views errors of idealism soteriologically, insofar as that the fundamental tenets of the enlightenment reflect humanity’s sin or fallen-ness, from which God in Christ saves. “At many points in his writings Bonhoeffer uses Luther’s phrase *cor curvum in se*, to summarize sin and the soteriological problem.” Green, *Bonhoeffer*, 122. His (mis)use of the phrase here therefore highlights the confessional context within which he views the problem.

⁶⁴ John Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: SCM, 1960), 59.

⁶⁵ DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer’s*, 27.

⁶⁶ AB, 50.

of revelation can pierce this *ratio in se ipsam incurve* that domesticates God and downplays historical reality.

b) Ontology

The ontological approach to the question of act and being emphasises the ‘always-there-ness’ of existence as that which is beyond consciousness. Here Bonhoeffer is concerned with how the I enquires into the world outside of it, and argues that ontological/phenomenological thinking arrives at the same cul-de-sac as the transcendental attempt, resolving being into its own understanding. Just as he thinks Kantian act-epistemology *can* retain a genuine openness to revelation, Bonhoeffer suggests that if ‘being’ were allowed to truly transcend the thinking subject, then ontology too could involve an incapacity that allows it to genuinely relate to the transcendent.⁶⁷ However, in his view, ontology only initially acknowledges that being transcends consciousness, before subsequently trying to “clear the way”⁶⁸ and grasp being *independently* of consciousness. The implication is then that human beings can “bear within themselves the potential to arrive at the eternal essentials”,⁶⁹ resulting again in what Bonhoeffer calls *ratio in se ipsam incurve*.

He argues that phenomenologists such as Husserl and Scheler, and Heidegger after them, all ultimately infer this same thing—an ontology without exteriority. Firstly, Husserl’s phenomenology focuses purely on the unmediated encounter with the essence of pure being within consciousness, enabling consciousness to form the idea of being for itself.⁷⁰ What should be a question of exteriority (i.e. of being which transcends the thinking subject) is resolved via interiority (i.e. the consciousness of the subject). Secondly, although Scheler prioritises the *given* over consciousness itself, he believes that human beings can wholly apprehend this ‘given’ through “the feeling of values.”⁷¹ With both Husserl and Scheler, then, the remainder is pure immanence. This kind of ontology merely brings being inside the thinking subject, and for

⁶⁷ *AB*, 60.

⁶⁸ *AB*, 61.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ See Pierre Keller, *Husserl and Heidegger on Human Experience* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 39.

⁷¹ “[I]n this ‘feeling of values’ the beholding I is capable of taking into itself the whole world ... and the very deity; being person, the I bears within itself that which enables it to behold the highest value, to understand God and itself.” *AB*, 66.

Bonhoeffer this is virtually indistinguishable from the idealism described under the ‘transcendental attempt’ above. Consider for a moment the contemporary approach of David Wood highlighted in chapter 2, where transcendence is reduced to the *interior* experience resulting from encounter with the ‘other’, and it becomes apparent how Bonhoeffer’s *Act and Being* critiques that kind of approach. Once more, transcendence is effectively denied.

Bonhoeffer thinks Heidegger offers a promising critique of traditional ontology because he emphasises being as temporal and externally relating, in contrast to pure phenomenology’s interiority.⁷² Heidegger thought the quest for ‘pure ontology’ was a lamentable error, because human beings do not enquire into the ontological question in isolation, but reflect upon their being from within their concrete situation.⁷³ Heidegger therefore describes human being as ‘*Dasein*’ (‘being-there’) emphasising that there is never ‘being’, nor thought about ‘being’, without the ‘there’. In Husserl’s phenomenology, consciousness itself (i.e. where ontological questions are considered) remains totally distinct from all about which it enquires, and therefore in a way it ‘escapes’ phenomenological enquiry. This Heidegger objects to this as phenomenologically false.⁷⁴

In Heidegger therefore, what Charles Marsh calls “the aristocracy of the self-reflective subject and the privileges accorded its cognitive domain”⁷⁵ gives way to the concrete reality of being in relation to the world—a shift understandably appealing to Bonhoeffer. The ontological question can only be asked from the perspective of consciousness as already *Dasein*. The attempt to prove the existence of the external

⁷² Heidegger is a considerably more important figure for Bonhoeffer than either Husserl or Scheler. Bonhoeffer’s preceding critique of phenomenology is essentially itself drawn from Heidegger. See Stephen Plant, ‘Heidegger and Bonhoeffer’, in Frick, *Bonhoeffer’s*, 319.

⁷³ “Cartesian and idealist attempts to get from the isolated mind back into reality are rejected by Heidegger as the presumption to separate reflection from ontological determination.” Jens Zimmerman, ‘Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Heidegger: Two Different Visions of Humanity’, in Gregor and Zimmerman, *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought*, 111.

⁷⁴ “How Husserl envisions phenomenology, therefore (and which makes his method very similar to Descartes) is that there must be an absolute split between the world and consciousness. But how is this division, Heidegger asks, possible, when the very beings for whom this separation occurs (ourselves as concrete living beings) also belong to the world?” William Large, *Heidegger’s Being and Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 9.

⁷⁵ Charles Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Promise Of His Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 1994), 118.

world, which Heidegger calls the “scandal of philosophy”,⁷⁶ is but a futile attempt to speak of humanity ‘standing apart’ from being as if to enquire about it. *Dasein* finds itself already in temporality, already in relationship to what is there, already within limits, and always in relationship to ethics because it cannot be abstracted from the concrete. As far the atheist Heidegger is concerned, *Dasein*’s possibility for authenticity is its ‘being towards death’ (*Sein-sum-Tode*) a kind of paradoxical constitution of oneself via the negative, which Large summarises as, “facing the nothingness which is at the heart of your existence as nothing and holding fast to it.”⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the rejection of pure phenomenology in favour of a recognition of being in the world—and therefore in history—and also of being always in ethical relation to the other (recall *Sanctorum Communio*) means Bonhoeffer marks Heidegger off from the other phenomenologists, holding him in considerably higher regard.

However, Bonhoeffer maintains that despite this openness to existentiality and therefore ethics, Heidegger’s post-ontological metaphysics nevertheless implies that “human beings, *qua* *Dasein*, have the understanding of being systematically at their disposal”⁷⁸ and that therefore, “no room has been left for the concept of revelation”.⁷⁹ Heidegger *has* given an account of act and being together, insofar as *Dasein*’s act is always its being in the world (and vice versa) but his resolution remains intra-subjective: it “represents yet another Pelagian attempt of the self to understand itself out of itself.”⁸⁰

Overall then, what Bonhoeffer wants to show in Part A is that diverse philosophical epistemologies from Kant to Heidegger all fall short theologically, failing to acknowledge the correlative necessity for divine revelation, and to embody what in the previous chapter we called epistemological *incapacity*.⁸¹ In his essay ‘Concerning the Christian Idea of God’ (1932) Bonhoeffer summarises exactly that to which he wants

⁷⁶ “The ‘scandal of philosophy’ is not that this proof has yet to be given, but that such proofs are expected and attempted again and again. Such expectations, aims, and demands arise from an ontologically inadequate way of starting with *something* of such a character that independently *of it* and ‘outside’ *of it* a ‘world’ is to be proved as present-at-hand.” Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Macquarrie & Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), 249.

⁷⁷ Large, *Heidegger’s*, 73.

⁷⁸ *AB*, 72.

⁷⁹ *AB*, 73.

⁸⁰ Zimmerman, ‘Dietrich Bonhoeffer’, 114.

⁸¹ Wayne Witson Floyd, ‘Kant, Hegel and Bonhoeffer’, in Frick, *Bonhoeffer’s*, 107.

to draw attention in this section of his *Habilitationschrift*—that “theological thinking convicts philosophical thinking of being bound ... to a presupposition, namely, that thinking in itself can give truth.”⁸² What is required, therefore, is a theology of revelation, which emphasises that,

reality is consequently beyond my own self, transcendent—but, again, not logically transcendent, but really transcendent. Reality limits my boundlessness from outside, and this outside is not more intellectually conceivable but only believable.⁸³

The emphasis upon believability points to “the fact of faith”⁸⁴ as the basis for all theological thinking, which means, once more, we are ushered into a confessional context for theological epistemology—that context in which, according to Placher, the undomesticated conceptions of transcendence in the pre-critical period flourished. However, purely recognising the necessity of a theology revelation conceived in a confessional context does not immediately resolve the issue. As Bonhoeffer shows, theologies of revelation themselves can fall into either the act or being category (thus betraying similarities with both transcendental and ontological epistemologies) and in doing so fail to do justice both to contingency and continuity that he believes is vital.

Part B argues that a theological examination of these questions requires careful nuance with regard to both the contingency and continuity of God’s revelation. In other words, for Bonhoeffer, overcoming a domestication of transcendence so that God can genuinely be seen to relate to human beings presents—just as it did for Frei—a question about faith and history. Furthermore, as is the case with Frei, these issues appear clearly for Bonhoeffer’s via his analysis of Barth’s recovery of the true otherness/transcendence of God in relation to human beings.

⁸² *BBNT*, 452.

⁸³ *BBNT*, 453.

⁸⁴ *BBNT*, 454.

ii) *Part B: Theological issues*

a) *Act*

Bonhoeffer's primary example of revelation conceived in terms of 'act' is Karl Barth's concept of the freedom of God in God's contingent revelation—a concept encountered in chapter 3 of Frei's doctoral dissertation, and to which Bonhoeffer, like Frei, is attracted. As described in chapter 3, Barth was determined to reverse the way nineteenth century theology had "sought to take a private road from the depths of human experience and consciousness to God",⁸⁵ and therefore to counteract the epistemological moves implicit in a domesticated account of transcendence. For this reason, Barth's approach appeals to Bonhoeffer, convincing him that "the problem of transcendence poses a fundamental challenge for theology that can be met only through a nonobjective concept of God."⁸⁶ We recognise along with DeJonge, therefore, that only in his positive relation to Barth's theology can Bonhoeffer be understood as a critique of the domestication of transcendence.

Recall that for Barth, revelation is never merely 'the state of affairs'—never a dormant divine truth always potentially graspable by human beings—but is about God's freedom. Human beings "*cannot* speak of God simply by speaking of man in a loud voice".⁸⁷ Speech about God is therefore dialectical insofar as we *cannot* of our own volition speak of God, because "to speak of God seriously would mean to speak in the realm of revelation and faith ... to speak God's word, the word which can only come from him."⁸⁸ Such speech is only possible on the basis of "prior divine address",⁸⁹ not on the ontological grounds of those who speak. God is not *necessarily* bound to humanity, especially not by what Torrance calls "some Ariadne's thread of immanent continuity or *anamnesis* ... into eternity".⁹⁰ Moreover, revelation is not to be conceived temporally, but is purely contingent, having "all the instability of a deed being done

⁸⁵ Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910–1930* (London: SCM, 1962), 46.

⁸⁶ DeJonge, 'Bonhoeffer from the Perspective', 200.

⁸⁷ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. D. Horton (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1935), 196.

⁸⁸ Barth, *The Word*, 198.

⁸⁹ Hart, 'Revelation', 41.

⁹⁰ Torrance, *Karl Barth*, 46.

right now”.⁹¹ Revelation cannot be explained with reference to a broader context of natural law or ontology—it ‘just happens’ because God is truly, ultimately, free.

The positive correlate to this negative is that revelation is the *free loving act* of God, who chooses to enact the miracle of revelation, “the restoration of life to that which otherwise was doomed to corruption.”⁹² Barth’s dialectical approach to revelation, therefore, clarifies “both the separation and the connexion which the act of revelation effects, because revelation is God himself coming to man, God in his goodness coming to man in his humanity”⁹³—supremely in Jesus Christ. The strength of this position as regards Bonhoeffer’s critique should be clear: Barth is insisting upon the act of the truly other as that which places humanity into truth. Therefore Barth’s *act* concept of revelation utterly rejects the modernist attempt to define God within the epistemological act of the individual subject.

Nevertheless, as appealing as this approach is—cutting as it does the ties with nineteenth century emphasis upon revelation as innate possibility⁹⁴—Bonhoeffer, like Frei, believes Barth’s emphasis upon the contingent act of God as subject does not ground proper human relationship to transcendence, but dramatically restricts the place of continuity—and thereby the historical—in relation to revelation. In Barth’s scheme, says Bonhoeffer, the pure contingency of revelation means “God’s freedom and the act of faith are essentially supratemporal”.⁹⁵ Echoes of Frei’s diagnosis of epistemological monophysitism are not hard to discern here, and the fact that both theologians make this similar point in relation to Barth, whilst criticising him only “as an ally”,⁹⁶ is a significant similarity in their point of departure on the question of

⁹¹ Karl Barth, *Die Christliche Dogmatik*, quoted in *AB*, 83.

⁹² Hart, ‘Revelation’, 43.

⁹³ Torrance, *Karl Barth*, 82.

⁹⁴ In his inaugural lecture in Berlin, Bonhoeffer robustly dismisses the concept of ‘possibility’ in theology. Revelation as ‘possibility’, he says, rationalises and fixes reality in a semi-Pelagian fashion that fails to allow human beings to be actually confronted and changed by what they encounter, making reality instead utterly graspable. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, ‘The Anthropological Question in Contemporary Philosophy and Theology’, in *BBNT*, 403–405. See also *BBNT*, 452.

⁹⁵ *AB*, 84.

⁹⁶ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 53. See also Pangritz: “The acuity of the critique of Barth present in *Act and Being* should not deceive one into ranking Bonhoeffer with the colleagues at the Berlin faculty in their opposition to Barth. The converse is more likely: Precisely because he feels close to Barth—the many approvingly cited quotations affirm this perception—Bonhoeffer endeavors to work out as closely as

revelation, and thus points toward the promise of putting their Christology's together. Both theologians develop their constructive Christology with concerned attention not just to un-domesticated transcendence, but also to historicity. Therefore the act of reading them together to supplement and support one another's theology is a task complementing their own agendas. In other words, this particular 'fit' between Frei and Bonhoeffer—such that Frei's diagnosis of epistemological monophysitism can function to describe that to which Bonhoeffer too is averse—provides a strong basis for my constructive comparison.⁹⁷

Bonhoeffer also thinks Barth's dialectical act concept of revelation possesses the same failing as transcendentalism, insofar as it is primarily an *inward-looking* reflection upon the inability of the human being to really connect with the transcendent, with God. DeJonge explains how, for Bonhoeffer, Barth's notion of human incapacity as regards revelation results

“from a philosophical conviction about the finite mind's inability (*incapax*) to grasp the infinite ... Barth arrives at a 'quite general' not-knowing based on philosophical anthropology rather than on the reality of revelation.”⁹⁸

Thus, in the same way that transcendentalism fails concerning its lack of historicity and its self-referential nature, so, believes Bonhoeffer, does Barth's formal act-concept of revelation.

Contrastingly, Bonhoeffer wants to speak of humanity being genuinely encountered by God in historical continuity, where the substance of that encounter is the substance

possible the differences which nevertheless exist between them.” Andreas Pangritz, 'Bonhoeffer and the Barthian Movement', in Frick, *Bonhoeffer's*, 251–252.

⁹⁷ It is important to specifically locate this similarity between Frei and Bonhoeffer in relation to Barth's *early* work, and not just 'Barth's theology' in general. Tom Greggs argues that there are number of ways in which Barth's later theology (especially in *Church Dogmatics II/2* and *III/1*, neither of which Bonhoeffer lived long enough to engage critically with) go a considerable way to answering Bonhoeffer's criticisms in *Act and Being* and later on in *Letters and Papers from Prison* (see chapter 7). Tom Greggs, *Theology Against Religion: Constructive Dialogues with Bonhoeffer and Barth* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 74–86. See also Marsh, *Reclaiming*, 3–33, and n.100 below. Furthermore, Frei's engagement with Barth, especially looking to him as an example of a preferable 'type' of theology, also goes beyond the specific issue of 'epistemological monophysitism' (see chapter 4, part II) and so cannot be reduced to that. The suggestion here, therefore, is specifically that both theologians' engagements with 'the early Barth' offer a useful locus for exploring their similarity in general.

⁹⁸ DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer's*, 61.

of revelation as person. Hence Bonhoeffer's oft-quoted re-evaluation of the meaning of God's freedom in revelation:

It is a question of the freedom of God, which finds its strongest evidence precisely in that God freely chose to be bound to historical human beings and to be placed at the disposal of human beings. *God is free not from human beings but for them.* Christ is the word of God's freedom. God is present, that is, not in eternal non-objectivity but—to put it quite provisionally for now—'haveable', graspable in the Word within the church. Here the formal understanding of God's freedom is countered by a substantial one.⁹⁹

In being towards the world in Christ, God freely donates Godself in pure self-giving love that truly bites with the cogs of historical human life. Rather than emphasising an incapacity of humanity or historicity to 'contain' infinitude (on the basis of which Barth makes revelation wholly contingent) Bonhoeffer's Lutheran sensibility—as DeJonge consistently points out—binds him to confess that the finite bears the infinite (*finitum capax infinite*) in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, who is God's revelation.¹⁰⁰ Revelation as God's freedom towards the world in the *person* of Christ

⁹⁹ AB, 91.

¹⁰⁰ DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer's*, 144. Cumin summarises thus: "[F]or Luther the central issue was ... about the immediate presence of this God right at hand." Paul Cumin, *Christ at the Cruc: The Mediation of God and Creation in Christological Perspective* (Oregon: Pickwick, 2014), 73. The emphasis by DeJonge on the confessional divergence between Bonhoeffer (Lutheran) and Barth (Reformed) complicates the view that Barth simply developed the capacity to get around Bonhoeffer's critique as Charles Marsh thinks he does (see n.97, above). Marsh admits that the pure dialectics of Barth's early theology warrant Bonhoeffer's criticism, but believes that Barth, understanding through his reading of Anselm that speech about God's being is a response to God's act of revelation, offers a nuanced understanding of the relationship between God's aseity (God's being in Godself) and promeity (God's being towards us) so that God's being for us is possible only on the basis of God's being for Godself in Trinity (God's 'primary objectivity'). Barth, says Marsh, wants to "stress the priority of God's aseity over his promeity, not in order to forge a dichotomy between God in himself and God in his revelation but simply to say that before all else is, God is God." Marsh, *Reclaiming*, 31. 'God being God' is God *acting* in Trinitarian self-relation, which is God's being-in-act prior to God's revelation. Marsh, *Reclaiming*, 17. Marsh believes that Bonhoeffer is not as attentive as Barth to this 'primary objectivity', offering instead "a continuous wandering along the various paths of the secondary objectivity of revelation, attentive with an intensity not found in Barth to the inner rhythms of worldliness but by no means disregarding the majestic narrative of God's aseity ascribed by him." Marsh, *Reclaiming*, 32. DeJonge, on the other hand, believes that these nuances matter very little as regards Bonhoeffer's critique, for they remain focused upon a Reformed understanding of revelation as subject-act rather than Lutheran 'person' understanding. Bonhoeffer is objecting to a view of God-in-Godself always 'at the back of' revelation rather than wholly 'in' it, and therefore "Bonhoeffer could very well concede that Barth's theology makes significant gains in deploying being-language and securing continuity. But he would remain dissatisfied that Barth grounds these gains elsewhere than the historical person of Christ." DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer's*, 106. Again, "Barth understands revelation's contingency as the act of a divine subject, while

preserves the otherness and contingency of God's act, whilst maintaining the substantial (rather than formal) nature of God's being present. In the Christology lectures that we examine in the following chapter, this priority of the particular person of Christ—overlapping as it does with Frei's priority of person over presence—will be developed and expressed more pointedly.

By 'have-able', Bonhoeffer does not mean that God is graspable like an object for empirical examination, but like Luther, he is emphasising God's free gift of *Godself* to the church, by virtue of which Christians have their righteousness in God, and the church finds its identity outside of itself.¹⁰¹ The fundamental characteristic of Lutheranism that Hampson calls "living extrinsically" is preserved, insofar as revelation is genuinely beyond humankind, whilst wholly *for* them.¹⁰² Rather than purely being acted-upon, human beings must be encountered by, and therefore encounter for themselves, the God who is free for them and towards them. Whilst allying himself with Barth on the crucial otherness of God from the world, Bonhoeffer believes that Barth's theology of revelation as contingent act alone gives an unsatisfactory account both of the fullness of God's act towards human history in Christ and of the contemporary reality of the Christian person in relation to God's revelation.

b) Being

Bonhoeffer treats attempts to define revelation as ontology comparatively briefly, showing us—as was the case with both transcendental and ontological philosophies—

Bonhoeffer understands revelation's contingency as the act of a divine person whose being is in history." DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer's*, 145.

¹⁰¹ See also *LT*, 31–33. Luther (as Bonhoeffer also explains in *LT*, 31) speaks of the "the righteousness of another, instilled from without" according to which, "[t]hrough faith in Christ, therefore, Christ's righteousness becomes our righteousness and all that he has becomes ours; rather, he himself becomes ours." Martin Luther, 'Two Kinds of Righteousness', in Timothy F. Lull (ed.), *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 155–156. On God's giving of *Godself* to Christians and the church in Luther's theology, and the argument that Luther advocates *theosis*, see Simo Peura, 'What God Gives Man Receives: Luther on Salvation', in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 89–92.

¹⁰² Daphne Hampson, *Christian Contradictions: The Structures of Lutheran and Catholic Thought* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), 49.

that such ontological attempts at the theology of revelation turn upon a domestication of transcendence, because they define revelation within the continually accessible. He uses three examples to describe how revelation can be understood ontologically—namely, revelation as doctrine, as consciousness and as institution. Firstly, to equate revelation with doctrine (e.g. saying ‘the *doctrine* of the incarnation is God’s revelation’) makes the divine nature “subject to classification”.¹⁰³ What is ‘revealed’ is a category or description into which God is understood to fit, rather than the description pointing to the greater reality. Here Bonhoeffer’s discomfort with classification complements Frei’s understanding of theological doctrine as a “descriptive grammar”¹⁰⁴ rather than a set of categories under which God in Christ is classified, or with which God in Christ is wholly correlated.¹⁰⁵ Revelation as doctrine loses sight of the sense in which revelation *encounters* human beings from without, destabilising and challenging them, requiring the suspension of knowing.¹⁰⁶ Doctrine as the being of revelation simply does not preserve an epistemological incapacity.

Secondly, equating a theology of revelation with consciousness means that religious experience has the “objective status of being”.¹⁰⁷ Once again, God is “found in my experience, understandable and subject to classification within the human system of experiences”.¹⁰⁸ This is little different from the idealism that Bonhoeffer rejected in Part A, presenting before us the same problem of God being resolved into the human thinking subject. Again, we see kinship between Bonhoeffer’s sensibilities and Frei’s unease concerning the subjection of the particular revelation of God in Christ to a more general category of religious ‘experience’.

Thirdly, if institutions (e.g. church, or scripture) are understood as the continuous existence of pure revelation, then again they place God at humanity’s disposal. In these three ontological concepts of revelation “the I arranges a preordained place for that which exists and subjects itself freely to it ... The I can subject itself only because

¹⁰³ *AB*, 103.

¹⁰⁴ Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1992), 20.

¹⁰⁵ Frei, *Types*, 81–82.

¹⁰⁶ *AB*, 107.

¹⁰⁷ *AB*, 104.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

that is how it experiences an ultimate securing of itself.”¹⁰⁹ In other words, that which is beyond is conceived within the boundaries of the I, and thus its true otherness is illusory.

Having rejected these three options, Bonhoeffer theologically modifies what he understands to be the agreeable aspects of Heidegger’s *Dasein*, and suggests that the only feasible ontological approach to revelation is to understand the human person as already being in (*sein in*) that which constitutes, really affects, and thus confronts them. Quite simply, this means being in God, which means being in Christ, which means being in the church. In Part C Bonhoeffer describes how

Dasein becomes free, not as if it could stand over against its being-how-it-is as autonomous being, but in the sense of escaping from the power of the I into the power of Christ, where alone it recognizes itself in original freedom as God’s creature.¹¹⁰

Here *Act and Being* charts territory close to *Sanctorum Communio*, where ecclesiology is the historically grounded alternative to intra-subjectivism. As he moves on to an integrative alternative to pure act and pure being theologies (towards the end of Part B and in Part C) Bonhoeffer therefore argues that Christological ecclesiology offers a properly theological integration of act and being.

iii) *Christ, the form of revelation*

Bonhoeffer focusses on revelation as the person of Christ, in whom Christians live, in the church. This bypasses individualism in favour of a community that genuinely receives its meaning from outside—that is, from Christ, and secondarily from the other person through whom Christ is present. Thus Bonhoeffer presents a theology of revelation conceived in relation to genuine, undomesticated transcendence.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ *AB*, 108.

¹¹⁰ *AB*, 150.

¹¹¹ Ray Anderson, commenting on both *Act and Being* and *Sanctorum Communio*, believes Bonhoeffer does in fact “equate the living Word, the person of Christ, with the believing community” and thereby makes the community a pole of transcendence in such a way that overtakes the historical transcendence of God in Christ, thus calling into question whether Bonhoeffer is really on the right lines here. Anderson, *Historical*, 218. He is right that this *would* be a problem, but in the light of the distinctions outlined by Tietz and others (see above, n.35) wrong that this is what Bonhoeffer has done. Incidentally, Anderson wants to recognise scripture as the other pole of historical transcendence, but his own elucidation of how scripture constitutes this pole is over-positivistic and lacking in nuance of the

Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology differs from the human self-categorisation that occurs when the church is approached as revelation-in-institution, without any real encounter from outside itself, because ecclesiology "conceived in personal terms ... [is] created by and founded upon Christ, in which Christ is revealed as the *δεύτερος ἄνθρωπος*, as the new human, or rather, as the new humanity itself."¹¹² Here, human beings know themselves as persons not via intra-subjective ontological reflection upon consciousness or the like—which in Part C Bonhoeffer introduces theologically as "being in Adam"¹¹³—but by knowing themselves as "encountered, judged, or created anew by Christ",¹¹⁴ in the proclamation of his death and resurrection. This is possible only by "being already in the community of Christ"—i.e. the church wherein one encounters God's act towards the world through others in that body. Occupying a child-like orientation to the future, rather than a self-reflexive "look back upon themselves", Christians are oriented to the one who defines them from beyond.¹¹⁵ This Christological and ecclesiological theology of revelation cuts across the dichotomy of act and being in revelation, because revelation is God's free contingent *act* towards the world in Christ,¹¹⁶ and the continuous *being* of the church as "the community of persons that is constituted and formed by the person of Christ".¹¹⁷

Bonhoeffer stresses that faith is central to being in Christ in the church (as opposed to being in Adam) emphasising how the confessional context of theology means that revelation is not delivered into the hands of the subject. A person's own faith is subsequent to God's act rather than some kind of act-upon-God, for faith is "understood not as a human possibility but as God's gift".¹¹⁸ Nevertheless that person

complexity between text, history and community. Anderson, *Historical*, 219–222. Were one to follow Anderson in seeking to overcome Bonhoeffer's problem of over-identifying Christ and community with a theology of scripture—something I believe to be ultimately unnecessary—Frei's approach to scripture is much more nuanced and careful. One could, therefore, explore Frei's theology of scripture in comparison with Anderson's, but that is beyond the scope of this study.

¹¹² *AB*, 112.

¹¹³ *AB*, 144–145.

¹¹⁴ *AB*, 152.

¹¹⁵ *AB*, 161.

¹¹⁶ "God's *action* alone can cause it to be historical reality so that it must be presupposed prior to every reflection upon it." Ernst Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Rumscheidt (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 13.

¹¹⁷ *AB*, 113.

¹¹⁸ *AB*, 117. Recall Barth's reading of Anselm on faith, in Karl Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum: Anselm's Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of his Theological Scheme*, trans. Ian W. Robertson (London:

lives their faith in the continuity of being in the church, in the body of Christ. The historical reality of the church as the body of Christ is the act of God that makes for faith. Thus being in faith, contingent and continuous, is the mode of existence of the human subject encountered by God's revelation in Christ. Emphasis upon faith, therefore, is not emphasis upon an intra-subjective epistemological act or ontology, but upon being encountered by Christ, the one who cannot be domesticated.¹¹⁹

III

Conclusion

Like his ecclesiology in *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer's Christological account of revelation in *Act and Being* is robustly positioned against the intra-subjective epistemology that characterises modernity. Human beings, he wants to emphasise, cannot place themselves into truth, nor offer of their own volition an exhaustive account of God. Bonhoeffer is therefore drawn to Barth's recovery of transcendence in relation to God's subjectivity. However, concern to unite God's act of revelation with the continuity of historical existence also leads Bonhoeffer to mount much the same criticism as Frei does when the latter describes Barth's 'epistemological monophysitism'. Following DeJonge's recognition that "the problem of act and being ... points to the necessity of developing a form of thinking that respects God's transcendence while theoretically grounding the historical aspects of the Christian life",¹²⁰ we can understand Frei's phrase to function as an effective label for that to which Bonhoeffer objects.

In positioning himself critically in relation to Barth, Bonhoeffer pushes us towards the importance of historical particularity in any account of Jesus' transcendence that resists the domestication described by Placher. In short, here we have the beginnings

SCM, 1960), 170–171. See also Bonhoeffer's essay 'Concerning the Christian Idea of God' (1932) wherein faith is the transcendent act of God, received by humankind. *BBNT*, 459.

¹¹⁹ "One can speak 'authentically' of existence only as of existence to which things happen. Every concept of existence that is not formed by being encountered or not being encountered by Christ is 'inauthentic' (including Heidegger's 'authentic' existence)." *AB*, 116.

¹²⁰ DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer's*, 129.

of how Bonhoeffer, like Frei, resists domesticated transcendence whilst emphasising the historicity of Jesus, and therefore points towards an account of the transcendence of Jesus himself that has his historicity at the heart.

Nevertheless, despite Bonhoeffer's concern for historical continuity and especially for a personal-ecclesiological account of revelation, in *Act and Being* in particular there is little explicit emphasis upon the particular shape of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The emphasis upon historicity *per se* does not pan out satisfactorily into descriptions of Jesus' historically particular activity or identity. To be sure, Christ encounters me from without, and determines my existence on account of this primordial exteriority and his presence to me through others. Bonhoeffer does not collapse Christ into the rest of humanity nor into consciousness or a similar kind of generalisation, for in *Act and Being*, Jesus' cross and resurrection are at the heart of God's transforming encounter with humanity, before which human being is judged, and out of which human beings live oriented to God's future.¹²¹ However, Bonhoeffer does not emphasise how the cross and resurrection only mean what they do in relation to the particularity of the man Jesus of Nazareth. In *Sanctorum Communio*, the issue is less stark but broadly similar, insofar as whilst Christ's historicity *per se* is constitutive of the historical existence of the church by the Spirit, his historical *particularity* is emphasised very little.

To mitigate a fall into that which Bonhoeffer wants to avoid—i.e. the generalisation of Jesus Christ under a 'principle' such that his personhood is no longer free—Frei's term 'unsubstitutability' serves to alert us to the kind of thing that needs bringing out more in Bonhoeffer's early work. Jesus' cross and resurrection are not only contingent events that interrupt human beings in their present, but also concrete particularities that, in Frei's terms, are constitutive of the narrative of the identity of Jesus of Nazareth—the one who is also transcendent. As Frei highlights by resisting the abstraction of the meaning of the gospels from the narrative, they are events that cannot be abstracted from the identity of the one who enacts and undergoes them. In other words, emphasis upon unsubstitutability can ensure that we are really speaking

¹²¹ E.g. "Proclamation of the cross and resurrection, determined by eschatology and predestination, and the occurrence effective within that proclamation, lift the past into the present or paradoxically into the future." *AB*, 111.

of a theology of *Jesus*' transcendence rather than a concept of transcendence (the general category) that is only secondarily Christological. To borrow Frei's term, if properly conceived, transcendence is "constrained" to refer to Jesus himself, rather than vice versa.¹²² Unsubstitutability guards against generalisation.

If the confessional (Lutheran) aspect is crucial to understanding *Act and Being*, then, as DeJonge also notes, it is also explicitly central to Bonhoeffer's Christology lectures in 1933, where the substance of Christ as revelation over and against human epistemology is explicated via a Lutheran *theologia crucis*.¹²³ H. Gaylon Barker has recently demonstrated that it would be a misrepresentation of Bonhoeffer's work to suggest that a *theologia crucis* appears from nowhere in the Christology lectures.¹²⁴ Indeed, even without *Sanctorum Communio* or *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer's sermons and meditations prior to 1933 illuminate the importance of a *theologia crucis* for him.¹²⁵ However, the 1933 lectures are where this aspect of Bonhoeffer's thought is explicated in the most sustained and detailed way—especially regarding the humiliation of Christ as the stumbling block to humanity—and they also become a vital reference point when understanding work that follows them.¹²⁶

Therefore, we turn now to Bonhoeffer's Christology lectures for the purpose of explicating his crucial contribution to a theology of the transcendence of Jesus developed alongside Frei. Where this chapter has described Frei and Bonhoeffer's similar starting point regarding a theology of transcendence, the next chapter continues to emphasise and how Frei's notion of 'unsubstitutability' can guide a

¹²² Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 153.

¹²³ DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer's*, 85.

¹²⁴ H. Gaylon Barker, *The Cross of Reality: Luther's Theologia Crucis and Bonhoeffer's Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015) esp. part III (125–248). Note: there is a mismatch in how the parts of this book are labelled, the contents page describing this section as part II, and the actual section being labeled part III.

¹²⁵ E.g. "We stand before Good Friday and Easter, the days of God's almighty deeds in history, deeds in which God's judgement and grace became visible for all the world, judgement in those hours in which Jesus Christ the Lord hung on the cross, grace in that hour when death was devoured in victory." *BBN*, 484; "[F]rom within eternity itself God has extended a hand into time in Jesus Christ ... amid all the transitoriness and darkness stands a sign from eternity, serious and mighty, bathed in the radiance of the divine sun of grace and light—the cross." *BBN*, 519; "Christ on the cross—that was the message which Paul sent out ... That was the God for whom the first martyrs died. It was the God that Luther rediscovered ... Christ on the cross, Christ the hidden king of the hidden kingdom—that is the message of the Protestant church." *EAPW*, 418.

¹²⁶ Barker, *The Cross*, 230–231.

reading of Bonhoeffer's theology of revelation in Christ, but in addition, reflects upon how Bonhoeffer's theology—specifically his *theologia crucis*—can significantly develop Frei's work.

Chapter 6.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER: TRANSCENDENCE, A *THEOLOGIA CRUCIS* AND UNSUBSTITUTABILITY

This chapter describes how Bonhoeffer's 1933 Christology lectures further his Christological critique of domesticated transcendence, especially via a Lutheran *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross); and shows how reading this aspect of Bonhoeffer's work alongside Frei allows both theologians to add to each another's contribution towards a theology of the transcendence of Jesus.¹ Fusing central Lutheran themes with Kierkegaard's language of 'incognito', Bonhoeffer emphasises Kierkegaard's sense of the paradoxical offense at the heart of the gospel, whilst following Luther in such a way that allows a more robust concept of particular historicity than Kierkegaard himself. This makes for a rich theology of Christ's transcendence: Jesus is the one who as wholly other comes to us from without and transcends in and by virtue of his concrete—and scandalous—history.

After highlighting how Bonhoeffer's lectures begin from the same starting point as Frei's *Identity*, this chapter suggests three ways Bonhoeffer and Frei can develop one another's work. Firstly, I re-state the point at made the end of the preceding chapter, that Frei's concept of unsubstitutability urges us to highlight, more explicitly than Bonhoeffer does, the historical particularity of Jesus in a *theologia crucis*. Frei exhorts Bonhoeffer readers to articulate Bonhoeffer's *theologia crucis* at the level of realistic narrative, so that Jesus is understood always to transcend precisely as a concrete and particular person. Here, Frei assists a corrective to readings of Bonhoeffer that concentrate too heavily on the general anthropological dimension of Christ as person *per se*, without emphasising his unique particularity as Divine-human person. In return, Bonhoeffer's *theologia crucis* offers a deep reflection upon the problematic paradox of Jesus' own unsubstitutable historicity, and thereby supplements Frei's own description of how Jesus who "walked incognito"² is "a very demanding figure".³ This

¹ Bonhoeffer's Christology lectures are possessed only in the form of students' notes, but these are adequately detailed for a meaningful reconstruction. See *B*, 299 n.1.

² Hans W. Frei, 'The Encounter of Jesus with the German Academy', in Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, edited by George Hunsinger and William Placher (Yale: Yale University Press, 1992), 136.

difficulty of relating to Christ forms a particularly strong example of how Frei and Bonhoeffer can be brought together towards articulating a theology of Jesus' transcendence at the level of historical particularity. Thirdly, I elucidate the connection between Bonhoeffer's emphasis upon Christ as *pro me* and Frei's cultural linguistic attention to the community normed by the identity of Christ. Here, my observation that Bonhoeffer offers Frei scholarship an emphasis upon the 'offense' of Christ is applied to the experience of the church, such that the difficulty of relation to Jesus can inform the humility, flexibility and generosity of its theology.

I

Bonhoeffer's 'Who' Question

One of the clearest examples of the affinity between Frei and Bonhoeffer is the way in which Bonhoeffer's lectures begin with the same central point that Frei makes in *Identity*—i.e. emphasising the question '*who*' as fundamental to Christology. Virtually mirroring Frei's emphasis on who Jesus is rather than how he is present, Bonhoeffer begins his lectures by insisting that 'who?' (rather than 'how' or 'what') is the only legitimate Christological question.⁴ Both Frei and Bonhoeffer, then, are theologians of the question 'who is Jesus Christ?'

Recalling the argument outlined in chapter 5, Bonhoeffer insists, like Frei, that Christology asks 'who?' rather than 'how?' or 'what?', because Jesus Christ is not an object to be analysed, nor a figure whose life or psychology merely points to a universal idea, but rather is the divine person who encounters us. Bonhoeffer narrates an interruptive encounter between the "human logos" (i.e. human self-understanding as epitomised in post-enlightenment thought) and the "counter Logos" (*Gegenlogos*)—the person of Christ who is the incarnate Word (*Logos*) of God.

[W]hat happens if the counter Logos suddenly ... appears, somewhere and at some time in history, as a human being, and as a human being sets itself up as judge over the human logos and says, 'I am the truth' [John 14:6], I am the

³ Frei, 'Encounter', 133.

⁴ *B*, 302.

death of the human logos, I am the life of God's Logos, I am the Alpha and the Omega? [Rev 1:11] Human beings are those who must die and must fall, with their logos, into my hands. Here it is no longer possible to fit the Word made flesh into a logos classification system. Here all that remains is the question: Who are you?⁵

Asking 'who' therefore retains a posture of epistemological humility—which Bonhoeffer calls "the silence of the church"—because it enquires properly about Jesus who is out of my grasp.⁶ Recalling the previous chapter, the 'who' question therefore prioritises the person of Christ over an idealist theology of revelation (see previous chapter) for as Bonhoeffer put it in 1932, "man will always be able to learn a new idea and fit it into his system of ideas; but a revelation in 'once-ness' in a historical fact, in a historical personality, is always anew a challenge to man."⁷

Asking 'how', on the other hand, concerns the way in which the person of Jesus might fit into my categories of understanding, how he might be 'mastered' by me; it is the question of an objective theology of revelation. In 1928 Bonhoeffer gave a lecture called 'The Essence of Christianity', where, reflecting Frei's critique of the nineteenth century 'lives' of Jesus, he described the connection between these Jesus novels and the objective theology of revelation. Jesus novels "give free reign to our imagination", says Bonhoeffer, and assume that, "because we already know from our own philosophy about the best possible morality, and the highest, most appropriate idea of God, we can simply insinuate this information into Jesus' own words."⁸

Bonhoeffer saw this liberal approach as little more than a form of Docetism, reducing the particular humanity of Christ to "the embodiment of a religious idea" such that the particular form of Christ is no longer challenging for us.⁹ In contrast, therefore, Bonhoeffer narrates what Phillips calls a "dispossession of the human sciences by

⁵ *B*, 302.

⁶ *B*, 300.

⁷ *BBNT*, 457.

⁸ *BBNT*, 346.

⁹ *B*, 336. "[A]ll liberal theology must be understood in the context of a docetic Christology. The idea of Jesus' humanity bypasses here the reality of Jesus as a human being, confuses the ideal of his humanity with its reality, in short, makes his humanity into a symbol." *B*, 337.

Christology”¹⁰ to reject the same aspects of the post-enlightenment Christology of Culture Protestantism that Frei wishes to counter in *Eclipse* and *Identity*. With a system of ideas giving way to a person, we have Bonhoeffer alluding very much to what Frei called unsubstitutability, and Frei’s notion functions as an effective term for what Bonhoeffer is getting at here.

Having laid out the ‘who’ question, Bonhoeffer touches again on his argument in *Sanctorum Communio* that personhood is constituted from without—primordially by God, and derivatively in relation to God through community—and in this vein explains that the ‘who’ question simply *is* the question of transcendence:

The question that asks about my existence, and calls it into question, is also the question of transcendence, because it is with reference to transcendence that my own being is called into question; in theological terms, because it is only with reference to God that human beings know who they are. If the ‘who question’ is the only question I ask that goes beyond my own being, then this is the only question that asks about transcendence and existence.¹¹

In this case, then, transcendence is not about distance or separateness, but about what Hampson calls “living extrinsically”¹²—i.e. having one’s personhood defined from beyond oneself, in particular by God. As we will see, God’s transcendent being-towards-the-world is not mere epistemological one-upmanship, as if God’s act in Christ is *merely* to prove people wrong and God right. Rather, God’s being towards the world is, as Bonhoeffer’s Lutheran Christology will make clear, about the world’s salvation through the crucified and risen Christ.

Christology is therefore not in the business of proving or rationalising the union of Jesus’ divinity and/or humanity under post-enlightenment categories, nor is it the ‘science’ of the hypostatic union as a necessary prerequisite to thinking about Jesus.

¹⁰ Jacob Philips, ‘Dispossessed Science, Dispossessed Self: Dilthey and Bonhoeffer’s Christology Lectures of 1933’, in Adam C. Clark and Michael Mawson (eds.), *Ontology and Ethics: Bonhoeffer and Contemporary Scholarship* (Oregon: Pickwick, 2013), 68. See also Paul Janz, *God the Mind’s Desire* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), 205. Janz too recognises that this “*genuinely dispossessive* question” is the true question of transcendence.

¹¹ *B*, 305; *SC*, 51.

¹² Daphne Hampson, *Christian Contradictions: The Structures of Lutheran and Catholic Thought* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), 49.

One cannot go behind *any* person and split off their ‘parts’ for analysis without objectifying them and thereby dismantling their person-hood, and supremely in the case of Jesus Christ, one cannot get behind the personal union of divinity and humanity that is fundamental to his identity.¹³ In a later section of the lectures on the basic issues at stake in the history of dogmatic Christology, Bonhoeffer says that the Chalcedonian confession—of one Christ with two natures—functions not as a positive rationalisation but a statement of the mystery of this person.¹⁴ Witnessing to the “limitations of its own concepts”,¹⁵ Chalcedon refuses the ‘how’ question. “The matter itself is left as a mystery, for we cannot enter into it within the parameters of positive thinking. We can only enter in faith.”¹⁶ Christology, therefore, should highlight only the point emphasised in Bonhoeffer’s introduction: that Jesus *encounters us* from the beginning as the one who is the incarnate Word of God, and whose identity is not available to us in analysable parts prior to this encounter.¹⁷

Bonhoeffer’s lectures also re-emphasise the ecclesiological nature of Christology described in *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being*. Bonhoeffer believes that the faith “that God was revealed in Jesus Christ ... cannot be theologically questioned”.¹⁸ Christology is not about asking ‘how can Jesus be God?’ but ‘what does it mean that Jesus *is* God?’ or ‘who is this one who is God?’ We recall Frei’s unpreparedness to consider Jesus Christ in abstraction from the faithful praxis of reading the narratives of Jesus as literal descriptions of his identity as God incarnate, and recognise that Bonhoeffer too thinks Christology is a discipline that only ‘works’ in the context of *fides quaerens intellectum*.

¹³ B, 304.

¹⁴ See again DeJonge: “Bonhoeffer argues that Chalcedon, by resolving the debate about natures in terms of the person, prohibits discussion of natures in the abstract.” Michael P. DeJonge, ‘The Presence of Christ in Karl Barth, Franz Hildebrandt and Dietrich Bonhoeffer’, in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Yearbook 4: 2009/2010* (München: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 2010), 110.

¹⁵ B, 343.

¹⁶ B, 342.

¹⁷ “[O]ne can legitimately ask *who* only after the self-revelation of the other to whom one puts the question has already taken place ... That is, the question of *who* can only be asked on the condition that the answer has already been given.” B, 303.

¹⁸ B, 304.

Christology necessarily *involves* those who ask the ‘who’ question, primarily because asking this forces Christians to realise that they are the ones being truly questioned and encountered.

The question we have to put to the person of Christ, ‘Who are you?’ comes back at us: who are *you*, that you ask this question? ... Who are you, you who can only ask about me because you have been justified and received grace through me?¹⁹

Here, then, the transcendence of Jesus is not just what Sykes describes as “questions of transcendence *raised* by Jesus”,²⁰ but is about the questions *asked* by Jesus of us. In Christ human beings encounter God, the creator and redeemer, and therefore one who is utterly prior to humanity. Human beings do not define Christ, but Christ defines them. As Bonhoeffer emphasised in *Creation and Fall*, human beings cannot posit their own existence, but exist as those in the “middle”—receiving their beginning and end from God.²¹ Here in the Christology lectures, Christ counters humankind’s self-definition, and calls them instead to receive their beginning and end from him. Again, his transcendence is his being towards us as wholly other.

As mentioned above, this emphasis upon ‘who’ illuminates how Bonhoeffer’s Christological sensibilities overlap with Frei’s on the priority of identity over presence, and also on the centrality of Jesus as the *risen* one as regards his contemporaneous presence. Bonhoeffer introduces the question of Jesus’ presence in almost exactly the same way that Frei does, pointing towards the fact that with any other past historical figure, the word ‘presence’ can only be explicated with regard to continuing influence or personality, force of memory or the like (we can meaningfully say, for example, that Louis Armstrong is still ‘present’ to the jazz tradition). However, approaching Christ’s unique presence in that way fails to take account of his resurrection, which is the “ground and prerequisite” for speaking about Jesus’ presence as person rather than

¹⁹ *B*, 305.

²⁰ Stephen Sykes, ‘Transcendence and Christology’, *The Modern Churchman* (16, 1973), 66. Sykes speaks of an account of transcendence in relation to Christology “built on experiences at the instigation of Jesus which cause questions to be raised in a manner which continually points beyond the experiences”. He does, however, recognise that questions of Christology are about the *person* (i.e. ‘who’) rather than precisely how such a person is ‘possible’. Sykes, ‘Transcendence’, 67.

²¹ *CF*, 30–31.

effect or idea.²² Therefore, like Frei's assertion that the Christian community simply cannot understand Jesus as not-raised, and that *this* constitutes the basis for meaningful talk about his presence, Bonhoeffer points to the resurrection as the basis for Jesus' presence to us now as himself—i.e. the particular “God-human”²³—not as an abstract or generalised idea detached from history. Although, as we will see below, Bonhoeffer understands the resurrection as even more interruptive and ambiguous than Frei does, like Frei he understands it as the grounds for continuity in speaking about Christ. Christopher Holmes therefore implicitly summarises both Frei and Bonhoeffer, when he says “this Jesus—the Jesus of history—is present because his history never dies: he rose again and ascended. His past is present and also future.”²⁴

Bonhoeffer's Christology is an all or nothing discipline, in the face of which reason is “horrificed, dethroned”,²⁵ or in slightly more positive terms used elsewhere, reason is “willing to humiliate itself and surrender itself before the miracle of God”.²⁶ That which Frei critiqued—i.e. the post-enlightenment compartmentalisation of aspects of the Gospel narratives according to the perceived impasse between faith and history—is included under that which Bonhoeffer is protesting against here. Jesus is not available for rationalisation or compartmentalisation according to our own conceptions of possibility.²⁷ This will lead Bonhoeffer to make two crucial points, firstly that the difficult or confusing aspects of Christ's historical identity cannot be withdrawn from reflection upon his identity, and secondly that this ‘whole’ Christ is known only as one who is *pro me* (for me) or *pro nobis* (for us). Both of aspects are key to speaking about Jesus as transcendent, insofar as his particular ‘difficulty’ is understood as fundamental to the way in which he is *pro nobis*. Let us consider first the profound

²² *B*, 312.

²³ *B*, 313.

²⁴ Christopher R. J. Holmes, *Ethics in the Presence of Christ* (London: Continuum, 2012), 11.

²⁵ *B*, 302.

²⁶ *TEU*, 532.

²⁷ In his inaugural lecture in Berlin in 1930, Bonhoeffer asserts “we maintain that *the concept of possibility has no place in theology and thus no place in theological anthropology*.” *BBNY*, 403. Recall Marion's proposal that God is the one who is defined by impossibility, which in chapter 2 I suggested was a valuable insight, but not one that required the jettisoning of more orthodox theologies of transcendence, such as Bonhoeffer and Barth cleave to. See chapter 2, re. Jean Luc Marion, ‘The Impossible for Man—God’, in John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (eds.), *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Enquiry* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2007).

‘difficulty of Christ’, that for Bonhoeffer arises from his existence in the humiliation of sinful flesh.

II

Transcendence, Hiddenness and Humiliation: Bonhoeffer, Luther and Kierkegaard

Human beings today still cannot get around the figure of Jesus Christ. They have to deal with him.²⁸

‘Dealing’ with Jesus Christ is not as straightforward as what we might call ‘facing up to the facts’, as if we have to accept something regrettable but nonetheless perfectly clear (as one might acknowledge defeat in sport). Rather, it involves acknowledging the paradoxically problematic nature of Jesus’ revelation to us, in history, as God incarnate. For Bonhoeffer, the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus draw us into a narrative of paradoxical revelation and hiddenness. First of all, he emphasises that ‘dealing’ with Jesus is not about a grasp of his identity on the basis of his works in history. As Sutherland puts it, “[t]here is no epistemology of faith to be derived from historical study alone”.²⁹ Later, in part II of the lectures, Bonhoeffer explains that whilst “dogmatics needs the certainty of Jesus’s historical existence”,³⁰ historical research *per se* cannot “sustain a dogmatic assertion”³¹—i.e. cannot adequately access Jesus Christ’s whole identity as the *Logos* of God. Bonhoeffer does not wish to dismiss historical critical tools, but like Frei, he does want to radically contextualise them within the framework of the narrative of God’s revelation in Christ. “Access through the historical [*geschichtlich*] Jesus is only possible through the Risen One, through the Word by which Christ resurrected bears witness to himself.”³²

²⁸ *B*, 306.

²⁹ Stewart R. Sutherland, ‘Ethics and Transcendence in Bonhoeffer’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* (30: 1997), 545.

³⁰ *B*, 329.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *B*, 330.

Therefore, as for Frei, historical investigation operates within the framework of *fides quaerens intellectum*, simultaneously recognising its inadequacy and importance, understanding that the Christ who cannot be accessed by critical tools is nevertheless the one whose identity is inseparable from historical particularity. The Gospels narrate events within history; they belong, no matter how uniquely, in the kind of world in which people live. The incarnation means history cannot be isolated from God's redemptive activity, but neither can that redemptive activity be defined by historical criticism. The 'whole Christ' by whom we are encountered is therefore always the historical Christ, but his 'historicity' transcends our categorisation.³³ Here Frei's notion of unsubstitutability, by which Jesus' historicity is understood as at one with transcendent universality, effectively summarises what Bonhoeffer is doing here.³⁴ It is the unsubstitutable one who is not graspable by historical criticism, because he is the transcendent one who defines history. 'Historicity', therefore, has two strands for Bonhoeffer: history and faith.

“The two are linked together by our saying that this is the way the historical Jesus humbled himself, and that the [historically] incomprehensible Jesus is [as Christ] the object of faith.”³⁵

We have this problematic incomprehensibility because although the mission of the Son of God was undertaken in history, this does not amount to a wholesale revealing, but instead to an ambiguity, an enigma: “This is the issue, that the Son entered into the flesh, that he wants to do his work within the ambiguity of history, incognito.”³⁶

³³ “It is the Christ of history, the whole Christ, whom we ask and who answers ... To put it in the abstract: The personal ontological structure of the whole, historical Christ is the subject matter of Christology.” *B*, 310.

³⁴ Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 123.

³⁵ *B*, 331.

³⁶ *B*, 309. This point does not set Bonhoeffer in opposition to Frei where the latter's 'intention-action' identity description is concerned (see chapter 3). Frei's insistence upon the unity of inner and outer could be perceived as contradicting Bonhoeffer's argument that Jesus' actions in history do not yield the 'who'; but it must be recalled that Frei, too, wants to avoid a wholesale subjection of Jesus' identity to the tools of historical criticism, and instead explore how the Gospels function as the meaningful descriptions of Jesus' identity in the context of the faith of the Christian community. Therefore, intention-action description is about reading the Gospels as narratives of revelation, not investigating textual content so as to scrutinise the validity of revelation's claims. Both theologians therefore recognise that the one whose identity is narrated in the Gospels transcends the boundaries of a modernist conception of faith and history.

Bonhoeffer uses Kierkegaard's word 'incognito' to summarise the impossibility of grasping Jesus' identity on the basis of historical analysis. Crucially, though, he takes us beyond this basic 'ambiguity' of history as it is related to historical criticism, connecting Kierkegaard's concept of incognito with the hiddenness and humiliation that characterise a Lutheran *theologia crucis*. Here, I argue that Bonhoeffer develops Kierkegaard, allowing for Christ's incognito to be elucidated in terms of Jesus' particular historicity, not just a general notion of divine transcendence in history. Contrary to Kirkpatrick's suggestion that, in comparison with Kierkegaard, "according to Bonhoeffer, the identity of Christ as paradox ... does not play as strong a role",³⁷ I suggest that Bonhoeffer's appropriation of Christ's incognito, which neatly reflects Frei's own logic, actually forces a more specific paradox upon us than Kierkegaard does. Highlighting the difference between Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard in this matter will illuminate how Frei's concept of unstitutability brings the best out of Bonhoeffer as regards a theology of Jesus' transcendence, and also how Bonhoeffer can offer a robust *theologia crucis* back to Frei.

i) *Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer on the incognito*

"No theologian of his generation", remarks Daphne Hampson, "was more taken up with Kierkegaard than the young Dietrich Bonhoeffer",³⁸ and indeed, Kierkegaard's ideas of Christ's incognito, the offense of the gospel, and the 'ultimate paradox' (especially evident in his pseudonymous writings as Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus)³⁹ all play a key role in Bonhoeffer's Christology lectures.

³⁷ Matthew D. Kirkpatrick, *Attacks on Christendom in a World Come of Age: Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer and the Question of 'Religionless Christianity'* (Oregon: Pickwick, 2011), 149.

³⁸ Daphne Hampson, *Kierkegaard: Exposition and Critique* (Oxford, OUP, 2013), 175.

³⁹ Exploration of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms goes beyond the scope of this thesis, but a basic grasp of the relationship between Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus helps to grasp the point above. Johannes Climacus presents a somewhat more philosophical exploration of Christianity (see, e.g. Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard: The Arguments of the Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 1982), 15, 44) or as Julia Watkin describes it, is a "nineteenth century Copenhagen who is concerned with what it means to be a Christian." Julia Watkin, *Kierkegaard* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1997), 52. Anti-Climacus, on the other hand, can be regarded as a person of Christian faith. The relationship between Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus, however, is not one purely and simply of opposition, of different perspectives, with Anti-Climacus regarded more highly than the other (even to the extent that Anti-Climacus represents an "ethical ideal" that Kierkegaard himself did not believe he had reached. Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, 166–167). As Hong and Hong explain, therefore: "The prefix 'Anti' may ... be

Kierkegaard's understanding of Jesus' incognito focusses upon the categorical difference between God and humanity, and locates the incognito primarily within his being God-in-history. Writing pseudonymously as Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard says,

To be the individual human being or an individual human being (in a certain sense it is a matter of indifference whether he is a high-ranking or low-ranking person) is the greatest possible distance, the infinitely qualitative distance, from being God, and therefore it is the most profound incognito.⁴⁰

Christ's incognito is therefore an aspect of his being what Kierkegaard's more skeptical pseudonym, Johannes Climacus, calls the "absolute paradox"—i.e. the one in whom "[t]he eternal truth has come into existence in time".⁴¹ This incognito—that Jesus is actually the eternal God, but in human form—therefore makes for a proper posture of faith, rather than a confidence in the apprehend-ability of God in Christ by human understanding. Kierkegaard's more 'Christian' pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, highlights how Christ *wills* to be incognito, so that as the contradiction of human rationality, he can be the object not of rational self-congratulation concerning human ability to discern God ("the nonsensical-undialectical climax of clerical roaring")⁴² but of humble faith grounded on God's own act of revelation. Jesus's incognito is also bound up with his profound humility, that is, his humble will not to be recognised as who he is, except by faith. "What self denial!" remarks Anti-Climacus, "what an enormous exertion, for at every moment he has had it in his power to show his true character."⁴³

misleading. It does not mean 'against' but 'before', a relation of rank, the higher, as in 'before me' in the First Commandment." Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 'Introduction', in Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, trans. Hong and Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), xiii. The specific argument above can therefore proceed meaningfully by reading these two particular pseudonyms as representing a broad 'Kierkegaardian' position on incognito and paradox, whilst acknowledging that the quest for a broader 'Kierkegaardian' theology or philosophy across all the various pseudonyms is a much bigger task, and regarded by some as not only impossible but inherently spurious.

⁴⁰ Kierkegaard, *Practice*, 127–128.

⁴¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Hong and Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 209.

⁴² Kierkegaard, *Practice*, 128.

⁴³ Kierkegaard, *Practice*, 130.

First, we note the basic elements of this position with which Bonhoeffer is in agreement. Like Kierkegaard he wants to emphasise that “only through Christ’s own revelation do I have open to me his person and his works”,⁴⁴ and that this applies both humanly and divinely. Humanly, as we have seen, no person is directly accessible solely on the basis of what they do. Divinely, Jesus’ historical activity does not, in itself, prove anything about God unless one believes beforehand that it is God who acts in Christ. Therefore, for Bonhoeffer as for Kierkegaard, ‘incognito’ points to the centrality of revelation and faith for Christology. This means that the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus are not approached as potential proof that this is God. Rather, *vice versa*, we approach the historicity—the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus—in faith, asking ‘who is this God-human?’ The incognito refers to the whole Christ in his identity as the revelation of God.

Furthermore, Kierkegaard’s insistence that Christ’s incognito is an aspect of the ‘ultimate paradox’ bids us think of paradox as something ultimately *positive*, and understanding this use of the term is important as we go on, because it can be applied meaningfully to summarise aspects of Bonhoeffer’s thought. Paradoxes of hiddenness and revealed-ness, and sin and sinless-ness, must be understood, as De Lubac puts it, as those “whose orientation is towards fullness”.⁴⁵ Here, then, the paradoxical incognito is about God’s being *towards* the world in Christ, *for* the salvation of the world. De Lubac distinguishes paradox from dialectic, which seeks to achieve synthesis by “the clever turning of *for* into *against*”,⁴⁶ whereas paradox maintains the simultaneity of the one and the other, and has its energy—or its “vigor”—in a simultaneity that is oriented to but does not achieve synthesis.⁴⁷ Theological paradoxes point to truth grounded in the mystery of God, rather than in the grasp of humankind. They are, says Pyper, “irreducible and inescapable because the encounter with God pushes reason and the capacities of language beyond human possibility.”⁴⁸ Paradox is ultimately a hopeful, positive theological category.

⁴⁴ B, 310.

⁴⁵ Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1966), 9.

⁴⁶ De Lubac, *Paradoxes*, 11.

⁴⁷ De Lubac, *Paradoxes*, 12.

⁴⁸ Hugh S. Pyper, ‘Paradox’ in Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason, Hugh Pyper (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 516. Therefore, Ronald Hepburn speaks of the way a theologian perceives paradox as “not a *mere* contradiction, but a sublime Paradox, a Mystery”.

Kierkegaard's work reflects this understanding. As MacKinnon describes it, paradox for Kierkegaard is not about logical contradiction *per se*, but is more to do with the 'contradiction of the self', Christianity fundamentally being an "existence communication [that] requires the revision of our underlying conceptions."⁴⁹ As in De Lubac, then, Kierkegaard's paradox orients us beyond ourselves towards faith in the truth of God, which is God's relation to us. Understanding Jesus Christ not as merely paradoxical but as *the* paradox—insofar as he is the God-man, the one in whom not only the eternal relates to the temporal humanity, but the sinless one to sinners⁵⁰—Climacus insists that the attempt to grasp Jesus by a delimited concept of rationality fails, and the only meaningful response is an acceptance of the paradox by the understanding, which is called faith.⁵¹

Whilst Bonhoeffer only uses the word paradox once in the Christology lectures,⁵² it describes what is going on at the heart of their theology, with their focus upon hiddenness and revealed-ness, and particularity and universality. Therefore the link between Bonhoeffer's lectures and Kierkegaard's work goes beyond the term incognito, insofar as Bonhoeffer, too, is a theologian of paradox in the positive sense that Kierkegaard understands it.

Ronald W. Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox, Critical Studies in Twentieth Century Theology* (London: Watts & Co., 1966), 17.

⁴⁹Alastair MacKinnon, 'Believing the *Paradoks*; A Contradiction in Kierkegaard?', *Harvard Theological Review*, (61, 1968), 635. Rather curiously, Ray Anderson enlists MacKinnon's article to argue that the concept of paradox has no place in theology and should be replaced by 'problematic'. Unlike Kierkegaard and De Lubac, Anderson believes that paradox necessitates a Hegelian-type dialectic, and stands as something that needs to be resolved, thus failing to possess the kind of epistemological incapacity required in theology. Ray S. Anderson, *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God: A Christological Critique* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1974), 69–70. However, were Anderson to adopt De Lubac's and Kierkegaard's understanding, he would not need to reject paradox. Anderson understands Kierkegaard's theology of *faith* to be so wholly subjective (in human terms) that it provides for itself the rationality of relation to God, rather than being *given* its rationale by God who is wholly other. However, if Kierkegaard's concept of faith is in fact about "a letting go (a trusting another); if an act, then a negative act as Kierkegaard would have it" (Hampson, *Kierkegaard: Exposition and Critique* (Oxford, OUP, 2013), 24) then Anderson need not reject Kierkegaard's paradox.

⁵⁰ Kierkegaard, *Concluding*, 208–209.

⁵¹ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Hong and Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 59.

⁵² *B*, 330.

Nevertheless, as suggested above, the theologies of Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer do not map unproblematically onto one another in these matters. They differ concerning what they imply about historicity, highlighting the role of history in a ‘Bonhoefferian’ account of the transcendence of Jesus. In particular, that which Bonhoeffer implies about historicity as regards incognito and paradox, reflects that on which Frei insists, especially in ‘Theology Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus’ Death and Resurrection’.

For Kierkegaard, the intensity of the incognito—pointing as it does to the acuteness of the absolute paradox and the corresponding futility of historical-critical tools—leads him to render Jesus’ historical particularity comparatively incidental to the heart of Christology. In *Philosophical Fragments*, Johannes Climacus says,

The heart of the matter is the historical fact that the god has been in human form, and the other historical details are not even as important as they would be if the subject were a human being instead of the god.⁵³

This is meant to emphasise that someone in temporal proximity to Jesus, who might be thought to have the historical ‘facts’ at her or his disposal, is in fact at no greater advantage than someone considering Jesus hundreds of years after his life.⁵⁴ This is because the substance of the paradox (God in human form) stands alone as a moment to which none can be contemporary as such, because it is not an ‘event’ like a conversation between two people or a dinner party.⁵⁵ Rather it is a fundamental “coming into existence”,⁵⁶ or, as an earlier translation of the *Fragments* renders it, “concerns becoming”.⁵⁷ Put in terms of revelation as the early Barth conceives it, the substance of the paradox is therefore wholly contingent. The historicity of the incarnation is the becoming human of God—something that is ‘eternally historical’,

⁵³ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical*, 103–104.

⁵⁴ Kierkegaard is protesting against what Anti-Climacus summarises in *Practice*, that “[t]he majority of people living in Christendom today no doubt live in the illusion that if they had been contemporary with Christ they would have recognized him immediately despite his unrecognizability.” Kierkegaard, *Practice*, 128.

⁵⁵ As Ziegler puts it, for Kierkegaard, Christ is “an unhistorical person who, as the absolute, is unmediated by history and, instead, establishes all relations to him within a single situation, namely that of contemporaneity.” Phillip Ziegler, ‘Christ For Us Today: Promeity in the Christologies of Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* (15, 2013), 28.

⁵⁶ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical*, 87.

⁵⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. David Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1936), 72. All other references to *Philosophical Fragments* refer to the 1985 edition.

insofar as the fact of God becoming human is ‘historical’ for *any* believer who, at any time, “makes this fact the object of faith.”⁵⁸ Positively, this means that those not historically contemporaneous with Jesus of Nazareth are at no disadvantage.⁵⁹ Negatively though, the actual historical particularity of Christ—his unsubstitutability, and the life that he lived—is virtually subsidiary to the argument. Indeed, Climacus follows up with the assertion that,

Even if the contemporary generation [i.e. to Christ] had not left anything behind except these words, ‘We have believed that in such and such a year the god appeared to us in the humble form of a servant, lived and taught among us, and then died’—this is more than enough.⁶⁰

Kierkegaard is not dismissing the existence of Jesus in historical particularity *per se*, nor dismissing the person of Christ in favour of a principle. As Ziegler says, to claim that Kierkegaard is “concerned with the meaning of Christ for one’s existence to the exclusion of interest in the identity of Christ himself” overlooks the fact that only on the basis of God’s being towards us (*pro me*) in the person of Christ can we relate to God.⁶¹ However, even granting Kierkegaard’s focus on the person, the statement above threatens to sideline the very particular historicity upon which it insists, marginalising its details and approaching the threshold of the kind of generalisation that Frei recognises can happen if narrative particularity is not insisted upon.

Should we suspect that this is characteristic only of the speculative Johannes Climacus, as Anti-Climacus Kierkegaard implies a similar point regarding the incognito. Anti-Climacus certainly makes more of the particularity of Christ over and against the modernist tendency to think of him only generally,⁶² and but under this pseudonym Kierkegaard still identifies the force of the incognito in terms of Christ’s

⁵⁸ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical*, 88.

⁵⁹ “[G]iven the paradoxical character of the hidden revelation, this does not put us at a disadvantage over Jesus’ contemporaries ... God’s presence remains a hidden presence.” William Placher, *The Triune God: An Essay in Postliberal Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 45.

⁶⁰ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical*, 104.

⁶¹ Ziegler, Christ, 37. “[T]he God-man is the unity of being God and an individual human being in a historically actual situation” Kierkegaard, *Practice*, 124.

⁶² “The God man has been made into that speculative unity of God and man *sub specie aeterni* ... or made visible in that nowhere-to-be-found medium of pure being, rather than that the God-man is the unity of being God and an individual being in a historically actual situation”. Kierkegaard, *Practice*, 123.

being God in particular human form *per se* rather than those things he experienced, taught and suffered—which are understood to be consequences of his being incognito rather than somehow constitutive of it. That Christ is God but elects to *become human* is “the most profound incognito or the most impenetrable incognito that is possible”, precisely because of the “infinitely qualitative contradiction” that is involved.⁶³ Again, neither Christ’s teachings nor the “other results of his life” are as important as the “fact that he lived” as this contradictory God-man, whose true identity is incognito.⁶⁴

This does not sit easily with the way Bonhoeffer develops the concept of incognito in relation to his *theologia crucis*. What is at the very least an ambiguity with regards historical particularity casts Bonhoeffer’s theology into relief in such a way that the latter’s affiliation with Frei is illuminated all the more. More than Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer allows for the significance of Jesus’ historical particularity—upon which Frei insists—to characterise the incognito, because he begins from the assumption that “[i]t is the Christ of history, the whole Christ, whom we seek and who answers... The personal ontological structure of the whole, historical Christ is the subject matter of Christology.”⁶⁵

We are therefore forced to consider not just the paradox of saying that God has a particular human life *per se*; but also the difficulties involved in saying that *this particular*

⁶³ Kierkegaard, *Practice*, 131.

⁶⁴ Kierkegaard, *Practice*, 124.

⁶⁵ *B*, 310. Bonhoeffer seems to modify his position from that which he articulated in a lecture in 1928, where without mentioning Kierkegaard he nevertheless rehearses a position more akin to him on Jesus’ history. “[O]ur New Testament originated in a church-community that worshipped Jesus not as a historical personality but as the *kyrios*, the Lord ... and thus as God himself. Any psychologizing or historicizing interest is thus quite naturally absent. Its interest is rather purely to the point, immediate, and aims at the center of the phenomenon of Jesus of Nazareth, over against which all historical elements become unimportant.” *BBNT*, 345. Admittedly Bonhoeffer seems to be dismissing a particular nineteenth century ‘historical quest’ style approach to history rather than historicity *per se*, but he lets this run on to a dismissal of Jesus’ particularity that clearly recalls Kierkegaard’s own argument. Bonhoeffer wants, in this essay, to subject a ‘Jesus-personality-cult’ to faith in Jesus as the incarnation of God, but does so in such a sweeping fashion that he threatens to subject the ‘who’ of Jesus to an incarnation-cult, very much in opposition to the position he articulates in the 1933 lectures: “[A]nything involving his own personality, for example, with whatever fascinating or repulsive characteristics may attach to that personality, is infinitely insignificant to Jesus compared to the main issue, which is the decision for God’s will.” *BBNT*, 348. We can recognise a priority of identity over activity here, but the Christology lectures offer a much more nuanced version of this point—that the priority of the ‘who’ centralises the historical person of Jesus without making him subject to historical containment.

human life is God's. The ambiguity of incognito is not just in the 'that' God became human, but also in *whom* God became.⁶⁶ The claim that the infinite enters into history is challenging enough; but the particular things Jesus experiences, suffers and does serve to further confound the problem rather than offer clarity, and it is towards those things, insist both Frei and Bonhoeffer, that the word paradox should point. It is those things that Bonhoeffer insists constitute the paradox of the incarnation:

If we speak of the human Jesus we speak of God, we should not speak of him as representing an idea of God, that is, in his attributes as all-knowing and all-powerful, but rather speak of his weakness and manger.⁶⁷

We cannot 'get around' the questions or confusions that Jesus' particularity might provoke, especially in relation to assumptions about what we might expect of someone who is God incarnate. Rachel Muers summarises, "The question 'Who is God?', in Bonhoeffer's theology, brings us to this *incognito* inseparably associated with a particular personal history."⁶⁸

This key difference between Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard's concepts of incognito is most clearly evident as Bonhoeffer argues that Christ is present not only as the risen one but also as the one hidden (incognito) in humiliation. Prioritising, like Frei, identity over presence, Bonhoeffer roots the paradox of Christ's hiddenness in exactly that whole identity. Frei alludes to this issue in his remarks on the concept of paradox, saying, "the word paradox ought at least to be used with caution in reference to the personal being of Jesus of Nazareth",⁶⁹ the need for caution being precisely to mitigate the overtaking of Jesus' particularity by 'paradoxical themes' (Frei is remarking specifically on Jesus' simultaneous power and powerlessness).⁷⁰ Whilst Frei himself is nervous about using the word paradox, lest it imply generalisation, the suggestion that

⁶⁶ *B*, 354.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Rachel Muers, *Keeping God's Silence: A Theological Ethics of Communication* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 76.

⁶⁹ Hans W. Frei, 'Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection', in Frei, *Identity*, 5–6.

⁷⁰ "When we speak of the contrast of power and powerlessness in Jesus as he is depicted in the Gospels, we have in mind then no mere paradox, tension or transition between two states, qualities or elements in a cosmic, spiritual power struggle. Rather, we have in mind the mystery and the changing situation of a human being whose consistent intention is also portrayed as that of his and the universe's God: the accomplishment of men's salvation" Frei, 'Theological Reflections', 6.

paradox be descriptively applied to Bonhoeffer's elucidation of Christ's historically particular incognito would seem to be acceptable to Frei. We can therefore say that Bonhoeffer follows Frei's logic about unsubstitutability when it comes to the concept 'incognito', and in doing so, differs from what Kierkegaard seems to point to by using the phrase.

In a doctrinal sense, contrary to Johannes Climacus, Bonhoeffer wants to deploy the phrase 'incognito' to describe the hiddenness of *the person who is both divine and human*, and not to the hiddenness of divinity in humanity. When we speak of Christ's hiddenness, Bonhoeffer emphasises, we are not speaking about God hiding God's 'divine self' in or behind humanity as if humanity itself were a disguise. Therefore,

The God-human who is present in time and space is veiled in the *ὁμοίωμα σαρκός* (Romans 8:3). The presence of Christ is a veiled presence. But it is not God veiled in the human being; Instead, the whole God-human is hidden.⁷¹

A slight complication arises when we read this passage, because the Greek quoted (*ὁμοίωμα σαρκός*) translates as 'likeness of flesh', whereas what Paul writes in Romans 8—and what Bonhoeffer is undoubtedly pointing to—is Jesus being in the likeness of *sinful* flesh: *ἐν ὁμοιώματι σαρκὸς ἁμαρτίας*.⁷² Despite only having students' notes, we can be sure that Bonhoeffer does *not* mean that becoming human *per se* constitutes God's hiddenness. For example, he explicitly remarks that "the principle of hiddenness ... is not the relation of God and human in Jesus Christ, but rather the relation of the God-human, as already given, to the *ὁμοίωμα σαρκός*."⁷³

Furthermore, reflecting the Lutheran dogma of the two states of the incarnate Christ—his humbled and exalted state—Bonhoeffer emphasises that God's becoming human *per se* is a "glory", for it is "God's message about the glorification of God, who

⁷¹ *B*, 313.

⁷² Romans 8:3. The editors of the DBWE version of the Christology lectures highlight the omission of 'ἁμαρτίας', but in explaining the discrepancy between the notes and the scriptures, Paul's phrase is mistakenly translated "in the likeness of *human* flesh" rather than "in the likeness of *sinful* flesh". *B*, 313, n.34. This actually subverts Bonhoeffer's claim (see above). Elsewhere, a correct translation of Romans 8:3 is given (*B*, 356, n.171) but in this particular case, the matter is substantially confused by the error.

⁷³ *B*, 313.

honors himself by being in human form.”⁷⁴ The “revelation of the Creator through the creature”⁷⁵ is not humiliation, not least because the risen Jesus ascends as the bodily God-human, glorified and exalted in divinely human form. Christ is exalted as divine human being, the primordial *imago Dei*.⁷⁶ Yet, as ideas of incognito and hiddenness stress, “God’s becoming human in Jesus Christ does not visibly glorify God; because God who became human is the Crucified One.”⁷⁷

Now we are closer to the heart of Bonhoeffer’s difference from Kierkegaard. Unlike Kierkegaard, for whom it is the incarnation as ‘contingent becoming’ that constitutes the incognito, Bonhoeffer locates Christ’s incognito in the ambiguity of his historical particularity. Christ is climactically incognito in the historicity of his humiliation, in the likeness of sinful flesh, on the cross, where “for our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin”.⁷⁸ To use Frei’s word to draw out the crucial difference, Bonhoeffer is pointing towards the unsubstitutable historicity of Christ’s incognito, not the idea of God in human form.

Wolf Krötke states that “in all the important questions that must be decided in the doctrine of Christology, Bonhoeffer took his bearings from Luther”,⁷⁹ and Bonhoeffer’s appropriation of incognito follows Luther’s *Heidelberg Disputation* in seeing the paradoxical nature of God’s revelation in hiddenness in the particular historical humiliation of crucifixion. Consider *Heidelberg Disputation*, §19:

“He deserves to be called a theologian ... who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross”.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ B, 355. “Lutheran orthodoxy speaks of Christ passing through two states. The incarnation is not confined to the first state, the *status exinanitionis*, the humiliation characteristic of his life from the manger to the cross, but also refers to the *status exaltationis*, the exaltation, which glorifies the incarnation eternally within the life of the Trinity.” Jennifer McBride, *The Church for the World: A Theology of Public Witness* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), 70.

⁷⁵ B, 313.

⁷⁶ Colossians 1:15.

⁷⁷ B, 313.

⁷⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:21.

⁷⁹ Wolf Krötke, ‘Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther’, in Peter Frick (ed.), *Bonhoeffer’s Intellectual Formation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 60.

⁸⁰ Martin Luther, ‘Heidelberg Disputation’, in Timothy F. Lull (ed.) *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 31.

Luther will not have us see the things of God except in Christ who was crucified. For Luther the *communicatio idiomatum*—the communication of divine attributes to humanity of Christ and *vice versa*—meant that one finds the *whole* person of God in the person of Christ, and in particular the suffering Christ.⁸¹ Luther contrasts this *theologia crucis*—finding God only in Christ who was crucified—with a ‘theology of glory’, which “looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened.”⁸² By ‘invisible things’, Luther means “virtue, godliness, wisdom, justice, goodness, and so forth”,⁸³ which are not given to human beings to comprehend directly. Instead, what God makes visible is actually God’s hiddenness in the crucifixion of Christ:

Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognise God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognises him in the humility and shame of the cross. Thus God destroys the wisdom of the wise, as Isa [45:15] says, ‘Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself.’⁸⁴

Luther emphasises a paradox of revelation in hiddenness and hiddenness in revelation, and on account of his radical commitment to the *communicatio idiomatum* recognises that this paradox is inseparable from the historical “humility and shame” of Jesus of Nazareth. “[T]he God who saves me” as Lienhard puts it, “must not be sought anywhere except in the form of the man Jesus.”⁸⁵ The paradox—as Kierkegaard would of course agree—therefore shifts us away from reliance upon the

⁸¹ “The theory of the communication of attributes is intended to emphasize the fundamental theme that since the incarnation, there is no longer any valid relationship with God which is not also a relationship with the man Jesus.” Marc Lienhard, *Luther: Witness to Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982), 342. Dennis Ngien explains how for Luther the *communicatio idiomatum* functions not only to insist upon the true unity of the divine and human natures in the one *person* of Christ, but also to ascribe that which belongs to one nature to the other, in particular the human suffering of Christ being ascribed to the divinity of God, insofar as God divinely bears human suffering. For Luther, explains Ngien, this was not a theoretical deduction, but a concrete statement of witness grounded in God’s own revelation. Dennis Ngien, ‘Chalcedonian Christology and Beyond: Luther’s Understanding of the *Communicatio Idiomatum*’, *Heythrop Journal* (45, 2004), 64–65.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Luther, ‘Heidelberg’, 43.

⁸⁴ Luther, ‘Heidelberg’, 43. “Luther’s theological breakthrough is intimately related to the idea of a *hidden* revelation—the ‘righteousness of God’ really is revealed in the cross of Christ, but it can only be discerned by the eye of faith ... a *real* revelation of God, it is nevertheless not recognizable as a revelation of *God*, because it contradicts preconceptions of what form that revelation should take.” Alister E. McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1985), 158.

⁸⁵ Lienhard, *Luther*, 343.

clarity of human grasp of God's revelation, and towards faith.⁸⁶ For Luther therefore, and for Bonhoeffer, God in Christ's hiddenness constitutes that which makes for faith and therefore for our justification, and does so always at the level of historical particularity. In 'Concerning the Christian Idea of God', Bonhoeffer summarises succinctly: "God entered history in Jesus, and so entirely that he can be recognised in his hiddenness only by faith."⁸⁷

So, to return to comparison with Kierkegaard: the "other historical details"⁸⁸ that Kierkegaard apparently dismisses as peripheral to the paradox of Christology are utterly central for the way in which Bonhoeffer follows Luther on the idea of God-in-Christ's hiddenness. Whilst it is right to explicate the incognito in Bonhoeffer's work with reference to its origin in Kierkegaard, the way Bonhoeffer adopts the concept—especially with regard to his implicit affirmation of the *communicatio idiomatum*—does not allow for a straightforward line to be drawn between their deployment of the term, and their difference on this matter is illuminated significantly by partnering Bonhoeffer with Frei.

Furthermore, one of the clearest ways to describe the difference between Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard is to see that the way Bonhoeffer follows Luther on the importance of the *communicatio idiomatum* leads him to develop Kierkegaard's concept of incognito along the same lines as his criticism of Barth in *Act and Being*. In comparison with Bonhoeffer, both Kierkegaard's incognito and Barth's act concept of revelation can be understood to emphasise contingency at the expense of continuity. Bonhoeffer's elucidation of the particular shape of Christ's incognito—hiddenness in humiliation—follows the logic of what DeJonge calls his person concept of revelation in *Act and Being* (which grounds his attempt to regulate Barth's 'act' emphasis in revelation by insisting upon the continuity of God's activity in the person of Christ). To join the dots with Frei, we can say that in comparison with Bonhoeffer, when it comes to Christ's incognito, Kierkegaard is guilty of a degree of epistemological monophysitism. In

⁸⁶ Von Loewenich comments on the inseparability of faith and hiddenness in Luther's theology overall: "As revelation or faith is posited, hiddenness is also posited. The hidden God and the revealed God are completely identical." Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, trans. Bouman (Belfast: Christian Journals Ltd., 1976), 37.

⁸⁷ *BBNT*, 460.

⁸⁸ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical*, 103.

other words, when Kierkegaard describes Christ's incognito, he is in danger of devaluing the particular historicity of the Word incarnate in a way that both Frei and Bonhoeffer would be wary of. The Christology lectures therefore imply a theology of Jesus' transcendence, developed according to the same logic as Bonhoeffer's critique of Barth in *Act and Being* and Frei's critique of the same, and explicated with the historical humiliation of Jesus at its heart.

ii) *Incognito and the scandal of the Gospel.*

Bonhoeffer fills out the idea of incognito and hiddenness with reference to the stumbling block, or scandal, of the humiliation of Jesus. Like Luther, Bonhoeffer draws upon 1 Corinthians 1 and Galatians 5, where Paul describes the gospel of Christ crucified (not just incarnate) as a *σκάνδαλον*.⁸⁹ The NRSV translates Paul's word *σκάνδαλον* in two different ways —“stumbling block” in 1 Cor 1:22, but “offence” in Gal 5:11. Luther's German translation (used by Bonhoeffer) is more consistent, using *Ärgernis* for both instances. So, where the English translation of the notes from Bonhoeffer's lectures reads “scandalous form” (*ärgerlichen Gestalt*) in one instance and “form of the stumbling block” (*Gestalt des Ärgernisses*) in another, the two should be understood as explicating exactly the same central concept—the *σκάνδαλον* of Christ crucified.⁹⁰ In an admittedly rather historically sweeping statement, which again reflects Luther's understanding of the *communicatio idiomatum* (that the human suffering of Christ can be ascribed to the divinity of God) Bonhoeffer says,

God himself dies and reveals himself in the death of a man, who is condemned as a sinner. It is precisely this, which is the foolishness of the Christian idea of God, which has been witnessed to by all genuine Christian thinking from Paul, Augustine, Luther, to Kierkegaard and Barth.⁹¹

⁸⁹ “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block (*σκάνδαλον*) to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” 1 Corinthians 1:21–24. “But my friends, why am I still being persecuted if I am still preaching circumcision? In that case the offence (*σκάνδαλον*) of the cross has been removed”. Galatians 5:11.

⁹⁰ *B*, 313.

⁹¹ *BBNT*, 460.

In Jesus Christ, God is “present in the form of *σαρξ*, the form that is a stumbling block [*Gestalt des Ärgernisses*].”⁹² Instead of apprehending Jesus via categories of understanding, humanity ‘trips over’ not the idea that God enters creation as the creature *per se*, but rather the idea that God is humiliated in being in the likeness of fallen, sinful humanity.

[T]he conditions for his humiliation are set by the curse, the fall of Adam. In being humiliated, God enters of his own free will into the world of sin and death ... He comes among us humans not in *μορφή θεου* but rather incognito, as a beggar among beggars, an outcast among outcasts; he comes among sinners as the one without sin, but also as a sinner among sinners.⁹³

Climaxing on the cross, being in sinful flesh pervades all of Jesus’ historical activity incognito. In this form the Word incarnate was vulnerable to temptation like all human beings. Like Gregory of Nazianzus, Bonhoeffer wants to affirm that Christ could only save us by virtue of being utterly like us in sinful flesh.⁹⁴ He even goes so far as to suggest that this likeness means Jesus appeared sinful in his actions, despite his sinlessness:

He also did things that appeared to be sins; He gave a hard answer to his mother in the temple; He evaded his opponents’ questions; He called for resistance against the ruling castes of the pious and of people. In people’s eyes, he must have looked like a sinner.⁹⁵

One could call into question whether these things (his answer to his mother, evading questions, calling for resistance) can be described as ‘looking like sin’, and suggest that from other standpoints these might not be necessarily regarded as ‘appearing sinful’. A more robust example of appearing sinful would be his table-fellowship with ‘tax collectors and sinners’,⁹⁶ and this particular activity—one in which Jesus is witnessing profoundly to what Frei calls his “enacting the good of men on their behalf”⁹⁷—places Jesus historically particular activity at the heart of his being in the likeness of sinful

⁹² *B*, 313.

⁹³ *B*, 356

⁹⁴ “[T]he unassumed is the unhealed”. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epistola*, 101.32, quoted in Gerald O’Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 160.

⁹⁵ *B*, 357.

⁹⁶ E.g. Mark 2:15–17; Luke 19: 1–10.

⁹⁷ Frei, *Identity*, 152.

flesh. Nevertheless, the point stands that Bonhoeffer reads the likeness of sinful flesh as describing not just the scandal of the crucifixion but also the arresting challenge of Jesus' particular unsubstitutable life as a whole. The term *theologia crucis* therefore describes more than Bonhoeffer's theology of crucifixion.⁹⁸

However, the paradox of this one without sin who comes as a sinner does indeed reach its climax on the cross where God appears as not-God; where Jesus Christ is, as Bonhoeffer emphasises in *Discipleship* and Barth would later explicate, the elected one who is the rejected one.⁹⁹ There God in Christ is subjected to the worst that human beings can do to one another: torture and execution, and this gospel of crucifixion constitutes most fully what Bonhoeffer calls the "scandalous form" of the church's preaching.¹⁰⁰

Reading Bonhoeffer after Frei bids us recognise that Christ's incognito—i.e. his hiddenness in humiliation—needs to be articulated at the level of historical particularity, which means reflecting to full effect the historicity of the crucifixion as an event that happened to someone. Doing this brings Frei's emphasis to bear on Bonhoeffer fully, and also traces Bonhoeffer's difference from Kierkegaard to its logical conclusion regarding Jesus' transcendence. For example, we recognise that when Bonhoeffer speaks of the 'crucified one' in connection with the incognito (e.g. "God's becoming human in Jesus Christ does not visibly glorify God; because God who became human is the Crucified One")¹⁰¹ this is always an historically particular identification, functioning only with reference to the one whose identity is narrated in the Gospels. The phrase 'crucified one' refers to an execution by a first century

⁹⁸ H. Gaylon Barker, *The Cross of Reality: Luther's Theologia Crucis and Bonhoeffer's Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 14–15.

⁹⁹ D, 84–87. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2: The Doctrine of God* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 346.

¹⁰⁰ B, 313. On execution as the worst form of killing, see Dostoyevsky, "Murder by legal process is immeasurably more dreadful than murder by a brigand. A man who is murdered by brigands is killed at night in a forest or somewhere else, and up to the last moment he still hopes that he will be saved ... But here all this last hope, which makes it ten times easier to die, is taken away *for certain*; here you have been sentenced to death, and the whole terrible agony lies in the fact that you will most certainly not escape, and there is no agony greater than that. Take a soldier and put him in front of a cannon in battle and fire at him and he will still hope, but read the same soldier his death sentence *for certain*, and he will go mad or burst out crying ... It was agony like this and of such horror that Christ spoke. No, you can't treat a man like that!" Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. David Margarshack (Middlesex: Penguin, 1955), 47–48.

¹⁰¹ B, 355.

empire in the midst of a particular political complexity of the relationship between Jewish leaders and their occupiers. The incognito of Christ is therefore unsubstitutable and historical—as Frei would put it, it is “simply not the stuff of mythological tales”¹⁰²—because it is thought through with reference to the *communicatio idiomatum*.

Whilst Jesus’ incognito reaches its intensity in the crucifixion, he is incognito also in his risen and exalted identity, where his historical particularity remains. If we are going to claim that the crucified one is exalted, says Bonhoeffer, then, “the converse must also be true: we can have the Exalted One only as the Crucified One. The resurrection of Christ does not get us round the stumbling block. Even the Risen One remains the stumbling block for us.”¹⁰³ Therefore,

[W]e cannot get around the stumbling block. To the very end, even through the empty grave, Jesus remains incognito, in the form of a stumbling block. Jesus does not emerge from his incognito, not even as the Risen One.¹⁰⁴

This identification of the risen one as the crucified one reflects Frei’s point that the narratives make no distinction between two ‘identities’. Muers’ observation that Bonhoeffer’s theological convictions force us to see “the continuing self-identification of Christ”¹⁰⁵ from incarnation, to crucifixion to resurrection, complements the way Frei’s reading of the Gospel narratives highlights the continuing unsubstitutability of Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, that Frei focusses explicitly on the narratives themselves reminds us that this identification is not just by a principle of continuity of ideas, but because of what happens in those narratives. The *narratives* identify Jesus precisely by the marks of his torture and execution—the continuity of his particular crucifixion.¹⁰⁷ It is only as the wounded one that he is risen.

The resurrection, then, provides no way around the ungraspability or the offense of Jesus, because the one who emerges from the tomb has the problematic identity of the God-human who was crucified. That wounds remain visible in Jesus’ hands and feet,

¹⁰² Frei, *Identity*, 174.

¹⁰³ *B*, 359.

¹⁰⁴ *B*, 360.

¹⁰⁵ Muers, *Keeping*, 81.

¹⁰⁶ Frei, *Identity*, 181–182.

¹⁰⁷ Luke 24:39–40.

and that those wounds are testimony to his identity, reminds us that the resurrection is not a simple negation of crucifixion, as if that is past now. On the contrary, his wounds are central to Thomas' identification of Jesus not just as the person he knows, but as somehow God.¹⁰⁸ The offense of the cross of Christ is perpetuated, not mitigated, by the fact that the risen Christ self-identifies with reference to his woundedness, and in the eyes of Thomas identifies himself with God. Secondly, Bonhoeffer, like Frei, recognises that the resurrection itself is a problematic proclamation that, although historical, refuses to be contained or exhausted by rational investigation. He appeals to the "historical fact of the empty grave"¹⁰⁹ as that which highlights the resurrection as perpetuating the stumbling block of the gospel. The empty tomb means Jesus is 'not there'. If he were manifestly there, faith in resurrection would be false. Thus,

The impossible possibility that the grave was empty is the stumbling block of faith. The affirmation of the empty grave is also a stumbling block. Who is going to prove that Jesus' disciples did not find the body?¹¹⁰

The empty tomb, therefore, is a negative sign, a kind of historically manifest apophysis, where by not seeing Christ the disciples are propelled towards the belief that he is alive. As noted in chapter 3, too, the Gospels narrate post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, but not the moment of resurrection itself. Even though the tradition does not leave us with the empty tomb alone, the subsequent appearances do not neutralise the apophatic element in the resurrection, and the continual slipperiness of the resurrection appearance narratives strengthen Bonhoeffer's point. In addition to Thomas' confession, we have Jesus presentation of himself to Mary Magdalene, who thinks she has lost him, that culminates in the need not to cling on;¹¹¹ and the moment of recognition post-Emmaus that is immediately followed by a disappearance.¹¹² Rachel Muers summarises Bonhoeffer's thinking on resurrection by commenting on "an intensified silence of God" where again, "the risen Christ is not

¹⁰⁸ John 20:24–28. "[F]ar from pain and death being bypassed or 'transcended' in the usual sense, they are presented to us as now interwoven with God as we encounter him." Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: DLT, 2002), 79.

¹⁰⁹ *B*, 360.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ John 20:17.

¹¹² Luke 24:31.

available to comprehensive analysis, has no defined set of innerworldly characteristics, cannot be reduced to a collection of words, is irreducibly a *who*.”¹¹³ Rowan Williams’ theology of resurrection can also be read as explicating Bonhoeffer’s theme, highlighting the resurrection appearances as narratives of an “encounter with a stranger”,¹¹⁴ whom the disciples meet through the initial “absence and loss”¹¹⁵ of the empty tomb, and subsequently through the appearances of a “hidden and elusive Christ”.¹¹⁶ The resurrection thus perpetuates the impossibility of holding Christ within the post-enlightenment framework of human epistemology (as exemplified, for example, by the historical Jesus movements) because the stumbling block which gives rise to our faith, and “displaces the ego from its central and domineering position”,¹¹⁷ is as evident in the resurrection narratives as anywhere.

Muers marks the two forms in which Christ’s incognito is ‘deepened’ by his resurrection. Firstly, as is the case in Frei’s theology too, when resurrection is recognised as an indispensable aspect of his history, Jesus as the risen one cannot be accessed or grasped “within a framework of historical causality”;¹¹⁸ and as Bonhoeffer says, he is thus incognito in the epistemological ‘ambiguity’ of history, insofar as his resurrection marks a discontinuity for historical enquiry within a nonetheless historical (or in Frei’s terms, history-like) narrative. Secondly, Muers highlights a continuity, insofar as Jesus the risen one remains incognito in the form of the crucified (i.e. wounded) one.¹¹⁹ Thus she highlights the unity of Christ’s incognito in historical humiliation with the way in which he is beyond all epistemological grasp:

[T]he resurrection confirms the identity of Christ as the one who on the one hand can be known as the bearer of a particular ‘history’ and ‘form’, and on the other hand cannot be reduced to a fully comprehensible object of knowledge.¹²⁰

¹¹³ Muers, *Keeping*, 72.

¹¹⁴ Williams, *Resurrection*, 75.

¹¹⁵ Williams, *Resurrection*, 78.

¹¹⁶ Williams, *Resurrection*, 80.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ Muers, *Keeping*, 80. Muers also draws attention to Bonhoeffer’s theology of resurrection in *Creation and Fall*, where the resurrection, like creation itself, is *ex nihilo*.

¹¹⁹ Muers, *Keeping*, 81.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

We are then able to say that in Bonhoeffer's theology Jesus' historical particularity—his existence as one who identified with the poor and marginalised, and as one who was betrayed, tortured, executed *and* is risen—constitutes his transcendence, his ungraspability. As Muers comments (admittedly in relation to Bonhoeffer's later letters, but it is wholly applicable here too) the existence of Jesus in historical humiliation is about “the irreducibility of Christ to what is knowable, and hence to his transcendence of attempts to define or judge him.”¹²¹ God's ‘exegesis’ of Godself in Christ is troublesome for us—a stumbling block to any attempt to hold Christ within the boundaries of a post-enlightenment rationality.¹²² If we are speaking about the way Jesus evades human ‘grasp’ or classification, then Bonhoeffer makes it impossible for us to have that conversation without reference to the crucified God-human, Jesus Christ.

The stumbling block of Christ's hiddenness in humiliation is thus a focal point for considering the transcendence of Christ in relation to his unsubstitutability. When Frei's own emphasis upon unsubstitutability is read alongside Bonhoeffer's work, not only does Bonhoeffer's implicit centrality of Jesus' historical particularity become illuminated, but also Frei's own Christology is significantly modified to point not only to the unsubstitutability but also the *offense* of the transcendent one. Regarding Frei's comments on paradox in Christology, Bonhoeffer follows Frei in implying that any paradox is to do with the particular ‘who’ of Christ and not a general paradoxical relation, but adds to Frei by exploring the content of the paradoxical ‘who’ of Christ via a *theologia crucis*.¹²³

In eschatological terms, Bonhoeffer recognises that an ‘emergence’ from the incognito will come, with Christ coming, finally unveiled, as “the Eternal, the God who became human, in divine power and glory.”¹²⁴ The incognito, the hiddenness and the humiliation will thus be ‘cast off’ at the bringing of all things into Christ, resolving the

¹²¹ Muers, *Keeping*, 77.

¹²² On the phrase ‘God's exegesis’, see John 1:18 “It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known (*ἐξηγήσατο*)”. I am grateful to Roger Forster for pointing this out.

¹²³ See again, Frei, ‘Theological Reflections’, 5–6.

¹²⁴ *B*, 360.

stumbling block.¹²⁵ This might seem a somewhat sweeping dismissal of the ambiguities and paradoxes that Bonhoeffer has insisted cannot be evaded, but the theological sense is clear—a recognition of the Christian hope of God’s being “all in all”;¹²⁶ a teleology of presence rather than absence, affirmation over negation. Whatever ambiguity, tension and difficulty might be characteristic of the time in which the kingdom of God is ‘now and not yet’, the fulfillment of all things in Christ is beyond that tension, where the age to come is no longer in tension with the age that is passing away. Here, then, is the fullness towards which the paradoxes of Christology are oriented. Christ does not cease to be transcendent as who he is now—the crucified and risen one—but this identity will no longer conflict with the world.

And yet, despite this promise, the fact that Christ has not yet ‘laid aside’ his incognito means that the world and Christians remain in relation to the ‘stumbling block’ aspect of his transcendent identity. They cannot ‘solve’ the problem of being united by the Spirit with Christ who is incognito as the crucified and risen one, for the stumbling block is something that Christians must “accept as believers in Christ.”¹²⁷ Though, as he says in *Discipleship*, Christians participate in Christ’s suffering and rejection,¹²⁸ as we will see in relation to *Ethics*, this participation never collapses the distinction between Christ and disciple—even for those who participate in the form of Christ, he is the *σκάνδαλον*.

III

Transcendence pro nobis

Alongside the prominence of the paradox of the stumbling block in Bonhoeffer’s Christology is his refusal to consider Christ except as the one in whom God is towards me (*pro me*) or towards us (*pro nobis*). Therefore, God’s being towards us in the transcendence of Christ’s paradoxical incognito cannot be separated from the community to which Christ is present, and thus we recognise how Frei’s cultural

¹²⁵ Ernst-Albert Scharffenorth, ‘Editor’s Afterword to the German Edition’, in *B*, 488. Also, 1 Corinthians 13:12.

¹²⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:28.

¹²⁷ *B*, 359.

¹²⁸ *D*, 85.

linguistic investigations into the meaning of Christ's identity cohere with Bonhoeffer's concerns.

To recall the introduction, it is only by virtue of God's coming to us in Christ that we can ask the Christological question, 'who' at all, and even then we find ourselves the ones who are questioned. Christology is only possible because God is *pro me*, and God is *pro me* for the sake of my justification in Christ.

“[B]y virtue of what personal ontological structure is Christ present to the church? If one answers, by virtue of his God-humanity, that is correct but still needs explication. It is the '*pro me*' structure. The being of Christ's person is essentially his relatedness to me. His being Christ is his being for me.”¹²⁹

Therefore, Christ is not available to us “in his being in himself”,¹³⁰ but only knowable by us as he is *for us*—i.e. as the crucified one risen for our justification.¹³¹ Kant's unknowability of the thing-in-itself is superseded by emphasis upon the wholly-other-one who comes to us, as one for us. In speaking of Jesus known only as *pro me*, Bonhoeffer is emphasising both what in *Act and Being* he called genuine transcendence—the impossibility of knowing God-in-Christ ‘in himself’—and also how knowing Christ is rooted in Christ's gift. That is, we know Christ *as* he gives only *because* he gives, and *in* his giving of himself for our salvation. The model of revelation as knowledge gives way to the one who saves.¹³² And yet, as Bonhoeffer stresses, Christ as *pro me* remains the stumbling block—the one whose transcendence climaxes in the scandalous form of God in the likeness of sinful flesh. Our salvation is in the form of the *σκάνδαλον*.

We can trace Bonhoeffer's own explication of Christ's *pro me/nobis* through the description of Christ's contemporaneous presence in word, sacrament and church community. Crucially, in each of these the stumbling block is perpetuated and the notion of hiddenness in humiliation is recapitulated. Thus, as McBride summarises, “God in God's freedom not only suffers the cross but also wills to remain present and

¹²⁹ *B*, 314.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Romans 4:25.

¹³² See Kathryn Tanner, 'Jesus Christ', in Colin E. Gunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), 253.

public through contemporary humiliation.”¹³³ What Frei bids us recognise is that although this ‘contemporary humiliation’ is wholly bound up with the church, at no point does this imply a dissolving of Christ’s unsubstitutability, nor his transcendence as the one who is normative for the community.

Firstly, as the Word of God in the church (not “timeless truth, but rather ... truth breaking into a concrete moment as God’s speaking to us”)¹³⁴ Christ is present in human proclamation, and as such is present in humiliated form. “God’s Word, Jesus Christ, as the Word of God that has taken human form, is the Word of God that has humbled itself by entering into the human word.”¹³⁵ Once more we must understand that it is not presence in corporeality *per se* that constitutes humiliation, but the presence of Christ as the Word of God in the word spoken by fallen humanity, announced and received by broken humankind. Again, McBride says, “the Word of God is humiliated not only in the inadequacy of human speech and thought but also in its vulnerability to human critique.”¹³⁶ The one who is proclaimed is the one crucified (i.e. hidden in the likeness of sinful flesh) and the very presence of this one in human proclamation makes that humiliation contemporaneous. Yet, at no point is this humiliation in Word to be considered separate from the humiliation of the particular God-human on the cross, because Bonhoeffer is not talking merely about Christ being ‘referred to’ in word, but about the whole person of Christ being actually present. What one might call Jesus’ ‘textual’ humiliation derives from and is secondary to his unsubstitutable humiliation. Unsubstitutability serves as an appropriate term by which to indicate that once more this makes Jesus’ historical particularity central to the church’s contemporaneous relationship to the one who is present to them (as we saw in Frei) but with Bonhoeffer we observe that this constitutes a stumbling block and thus intensifies the epistemological incapacity of the community in relation to his identity.

Secondly, in speaking of Christ *pro me* as sacrament, Bonhoeffer again wishes to focus upon God-in-Christ’s presence in the likeness of sinful flesh. Agreeing with Luther

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *B*, 317.

¹³⁵ *B*, 318.

¹³⁶ McBride, *The Church*, 79.

that Christ as Logos is wholly present in the sacrament,¹³⁷ Bonhoeffer nevertheless wishes to sidestep the complex Lutheran discussions on *how* Christ is present,¹³⁸ and focus upon that fact that, as wholly present in the sacrament, Christ remains a *σκάνδαλον*.

The sacrament is not the becoming-human of Christ but rather the ultimate humiliation of the God-human ... Christology is primarily asking, not about the possible union of divinity with humanity, but rather about the hiddenness of the God-human who is present in his humiliated state ... Consequently the question of Christ's presence in the sacrament can be analyzed not as the question of the humanity and divinity of Christ but rather as the presence of the God-human in humiliated form, as the stumbling-block.¹³⁹

The *hiddenness* of Christ in the humiliation of sinful flesh makes for faith because the one who appears as not-God is in fact God, and correspondingly Christ's *hiddenness* in the eucharist—"he is the human being humiliated in the bread and wine"¹⁴⁰—makes for faith insofar as the elements (bread and wine) are in fact more than they appear to be (body and blood).

We can draw on Catherine Pickstock's work on the "inexhaustibility of meaning"¹⁴¹ in the eucharist to explicate this link between the sacrament and the *theologia crucis*. She explains how, in the eucharist, the normal order of sense and reference, where one can make sense without a specific reference (for example, speaking sensibly about an imaginary tree) is reversed. In the liturgical act however, the reference (the '*this* is') is what makes for the sense, not vice versa as is usually the case. The reference, '*this* is my body/blood', discloses an otherwise *hidden* sense—that bread and wine are not

¹³⁷ "The Reformed say that Christ remains only as Logos-person outside the sacrament of the body of Christ. Christ in his bodily form is not the Logos. He remains extra, outside it. Luther answered the Reformed question in the form of his doctrine of ubiquity. He said that it is the body of Christ that, as the body of the God-human and in its communication with the divine nature itself, has taken on divine characteristics. The body of Christ is not bound by its bodily nature but is present everywhere simultaneously as the *genus majesticum*." *B*, 320.

¹³⁸ Bonhoeffer believes that Luther's split account of Christ's presence in sacrament—*ubiquity* and *ubivoli*—ultimately collapse into being the 'how' not the 'who' question. *B*, 320–321. See DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer's*, 99–100.

¹³⁹ *B*, 320.

¹⁴⁰ *B*, 322

¹⁴¹ Catherine Pickstock, 'Thomas Aquinas and the quest for the Eucharist', in John Milbank and Simon Oliver (eds.), *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader* (Oxford: Routledge, 2009), 266.

what they appear to be, but are the body and blood of Christ.¹⁴² This hidden sense is confirmed only by “Jesus’ phrase itself, uttered with a simple authority which kindles our trust.”¹⁴³ For Pickstock, the way in which the eucharist holds together absence and presence discloses the promise of the sacramental character of reality:

[I]n carrying the absence which characterizes every sign to an extreme (no body *appears* in the bread), it also delivers a final disclosure, or presence (the bread *is* the Body), which alone makes it possible now to trust every sign.¹⁴⁴

Therefore, when we inhabit “faithful trust”¹⁴⁵ in the words of Christ, those words are a *promise* for us rather than nonsense. That things are not what they seem fuels our desire for God by pointing us towards the mystery of God’s gift to and in the world. This simultaneous presence and absence, where by things *not* being what they seem they point to God’s activity, corresponds with the hiddenness of Christ in sinful flesh in Bonhoeffer’s/Luther’s *theologia crucis*. Bread and wine do not seem to be the body and blood of the crucified one, but via faith, the paradox of revelation and hiddenness points to God’s activity towards the world, disclosing God’s gift towards us in Christ, which goes beyond our normal grasp of the world. The eucharist centres on Christ’s unsubstitutable activity (Frei), and in doing so also to the paradoxical revelation-in-hiddenness at the heart of his unsubstitutable identity.

Thirdly, after Word and sacrament, Christ is *pro me* as church-community (*Gemeinde*); but as Clifford Green explains, this constitutes an amalgam of the previous two rather than a distinct form in itself, because Word and sacrament themselves operate in terms of sociality. “To speak of the Christian Community as the form of Christ is to highlight the sociality of Christ’s presence in Word and Sacrament.”¹⁴⁶ *Gemeinde* is the social form of the Word spoken in its midst, the Word which calls the community to “love of the neighbour, thus creating the mutuality of freedom and love for one

¹⁴² “[T]hey are not symbols, but Word of God. They do not *mean* something—they *are* something.” *B*, 319.

¹⁴³ Pickstock, ‘Aquinas’, 272.

¹⁴⁴ Pickstock, ‘Aquinas’, 272–273.

¹⁴⁵ Pickstock, ‘Aquinas’, 272.

¹⁴⁶ Clifford Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 219.

another in the community of the new humanity.”¹⁴⁷ Likewise *Gemeinde* is the social form of the sacrament—the community nourished by the gift of the body and blood of the crucified, risen and exalted Christ. Here, Green emphasises, Bonhoeffer continues in the vein of *Sanctorum Communio*, insofar as Christ is understood as not only the ‘head and Lord’ of the church, but also,

the reality of the congregation itself and every member. This means that while the congregation only exists because of the revelation of Christ, this revelation takes temporal-bodily-social form: in the relations of persons shaped and formed by Word and sacrament, revelation is socially present in time and space.¹⁴⁸

The *Gemeinde* experiences the eschatological tension of being a community in Christ and yet also in Adam. Yet this tension itself is wholly Christological, insofar as it relates to the stumbling block of Christ’s simultaneous exaltation and humiliation, for Christ is present in the humiliated form of the church’s simultaneous existence as *sanctorum communio* and *peccatorum communio*.¹⁴⁹ Bonhoeffer says,

Insofar as the church-community is the church-community, it no longer sins. But it remains in the world of the old Adam, and as such it still lives in the aeon of sin. Christ’s being as the church-community is, like his being as Word, a being in the form of the stumbling block.¹⁵⁰

As with his presence as Word and sacrament, being present as community perpetuates Jesus’ hiddenness in humiliation, and we have already emphasised that this humiliation cannot be detached from the unsubstitutability of Jesus Christ—his concrete existence as the incarnate, crucified and risen God-human. Christ’s presence in Word, sacrament and community—themselves historically particular—does not overtake his particularity as Jesus of Nazareth, the Word Incarnate hidden in the humiliation of sinful flesh. Therefore, at no point does the idea of Christ’s

¹⁴⁷ Green, *Bonhoeffer*, 216.

¹⁴⁸ Green, *Bonhoeffer*, 220. “[T]o understand the Christology lectures fully it is necessary to recognize that Bonhoeffer still employs here the concept of Kollektivperson. As first in *Sanctorum Communio*, so here too, he presents Christ as the Kollektivperson of the new humanity.” Green, *Bonhoeffer*, 211.

¹⁴⁹ On Luther’s ‘*simul iustus et peccator*’ see Hampson, *Christian*, 24.

¹⁵⁰ *B*, 323. Consider this tension in the pastoral reflections of 1 John 1:5–2:3.

contemporaneous presence dilute his particularity and uniqueness—as can happen (as Frei pointed out) in more generalised elucidations of his presence.

In *The Church for the World* (2012) Jennifer McBride makes Bonhoeffer's connection between Christ's hiddenness in humiliation and the public form of the church central to her proposal for an ecclesial witness that is "simultaneously non-triumphal and faithful to the Christian proclamation of the Lordship of Christ".¹⁵¹ Her argument is a salient example of reading Bonhoeffer towards the kind of 'middle way' described in my introduction. In the concepts of incognito, hiddenness and humiliation, she recognizes a Christological form to which the church can confidently witness without falling into triumphalism:

The incognito of the crucified and risen Christ offers the church a non-triumphal place to stand in the midst of personal and sociopolitical complexity and enables the church to encounter humanity's doubt, suspicion, and protest against the hidden God with empathy instead of judgement ... The church witnesses to Christ fully aware of the 'christological contradiction': God's revelation in human form seen 'through a glass darkly' (1 Cor. 13:12).¹⁵²

McBride offers a Christological re-description of repentance grounded in Bonhoeffer's Christology lectures, whereby the church takes the form of God's own 'taking responsibility' in the hidden and humiliated Christ. Where repentance is understood as taking responsibility for sin rather than limited to confession of personal wrongdoing, she says, it makes theological sense to suggest that Christ embodies a "divine repentance"¹⁵³ by existing in the likeness of sinful flesh as the repenting one, even whilst maintaining his personal sinlessness.¹⁵⁴ Subsequently, the church is called to take the form of Christ's presence in the world as the one who takes sin upon himself (humiliation) and calls human beings to responsibility for their sin. As she explains in an earlier article,

¹⁵¹ McBride, *The Church*, 9.

¹⁵² McBride, *The Church*, 77.

¹⁵³ McBride, *The Church*, 75.

¹⁵⁴ McBride follows MacFarland's distinction between "fallenness [as] a property of nature and sin of hypostasis". Thus Jesus can exist in fallen (and therefore sinful) nature and yet be personally sinless. A total taking on/taking responsibility for sin is therefore theologically congruent." Ian A MacFarland, 'Fallen or Unfallen? Christ's Human Nature and the Ontology of Human Sinfulness,' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* (10, 2008), 412–413, quoted in McBride, *The Church*, 74–75. See B, 357.

[W]hen it becomes necessary for church-communities to complement public engagement with speech that is particularly Christian, I suggest this language first be the language of confession of sin.”¹⁵⁵

Repentant language moves into repentant activity, where the church takes responsibility for its complicity in the world’s brokenness by acting with loving and sacrificial humility towards human brokenness—in, for example, socio-economic deprivation and ecological neglect.¹⁵⁶ In this way, she suggests, the church is faithful to what Bonhoeffer describes as its need to be continually humiliated with its Lord, both confessing its own sin and taking responsibility for the sin of the world.¹⁵⁷

McBride’s proposal therefore has at its heart the perpetuation of Christ’s existence in sinful flesh in his presence as *Gemeinde*, which prevents the church from taking hold of Christ in a triumphal manner whilst witnessing to his specificity.¹⁵⁸ However, it must also be emphasised that even when the church takes the form of the humiliated Christ, at no point does Christ become an object for the church—as if we simply model ourselves on this way of being—but remains the transcendent and unsubstitutable ‘who’, the unsubstitutable one hidden in the humiliation of sinful flesh. The desire to be Christ-like must co-exist with recognition of his otherness.

Indeed, regarding Bonhoeffer’s reflections upon Christ as *Gemeinde*, emphasising unsubstitutability assists our discussion of Jesus’ transcendence in a crucial way, countering an over-emphasis upon anthropology that sometimes manifests in Bonhoeffer scholarship concerning this point—an over-emphasis that threatens to

¹⁵⁵ Jennifer McBride, ‘Thinking Within the Movement of Bonhoeffer’s Theology: Towards a Christological Reinterpretation of Repentance’, in Stephen Plant and Ralf K. Wüstenberg (eds.), *Religion, Religionless and Contemporary Western Culture* (Frankfurt: Peter Laing, 2008), 101.

¹⁵⁶ McBride concentrates on two specific communities that demonstrate this form of witness – the Eleuthero Community in Portland, Maine; and The Southeast White House in Washington, D.C. See McBride, *The Church*, chs. 6 and 7.

¹⁵⁷ *B*, 360; and *D*, 88. See also Michael Mawson, who adds a pneumatological edge to McBride’s emphasis: “Christ and the Holy Spirit are working in and through the church as a community of sin ... The existing church is a distinctive and visible witness in the world, to a significant extent at least, by means of the Spirit convicting it of its sin.” Michael Mawson, ‘The Spirit and the Community: Pneumatology and Ecclesiology in Jenson, Hütter and Bonhoeffer’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* (15, 2013), 468.

¹⁵⁸ McBride, ‘Thinking Within’, 93–95.

skew the discussion of Jesus' transcendence towards generalisation and away from the particular form of the crucified one.

For example, Alexander Jensen has argued that the centrality of personal encounter with the other in Bonhoeffer's theology makes a strong case for his identity as an apophatic, or 'negative' theologian. Bonhoeffer's Christology, says Jensen, is based upon an "apophaticism of person"¹⁵⁹—i.e. "the mystery of encounter with the other, who, as person, cannot be fully understood and explained".¹⁶⁰ He argues that this is the first of two apophatic elements in Bonhoeffer's thought; the second being his understanding of the limiting rather than defining function of theological language like the Chalcedonian confession—that is, "theology is negative insofar as it ... sets boundaries for the legitimate expression of the foundational experience."¹⁶¹ Although one could not disagree with the latter point, the summary of the first point is incomplete, for to develop Bonhoeffer's apophatic credentials by reference to a general 'otherness of other people' fails to point explicitly to the fact that this otherness is itself derivative of Jesus Christ's identity as primordially other—i.e. as the Incarnate *Logos* of God (see chapter 5).¹⁶² Furthermore, it bypasses what I suggest is a more significant apophatic element in Bonhoeffer's Lutheran Christology, namely that Christ evades our attempts to define him precisely because of his scandalous form—the hiddenness of the Word of God incarnate in the humiliation of sinful flesh—and not by virtue of his general personhood.

Anthropology does not wholly constitute the transcendence at the heart of Christology, and neither does drawing on Bonhoeffer's account of human otherness as a primary example of apophasis adequately express the paradoxical transcendence of Christ at the heart of his Christology. An exploration of apophasis (which implies

¹⁵⁹ Alexander S. Jensen, 'Schleiermacher and Bonhoeffer as Negative Theologians: a Western Response to some Eastern Challenges', *St Mark's Review* (215: 2011), 15. Jensen draws this term from Eastern Orthodox theologian Christos Yannaras. Jensen, 'Schleiermacher and Bonhoeffer', 9–11.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² Jensen goes some way to correcting this imbalance in his 2014 book *Divine Providence and Human Agency*. The introduction derives from the 2011 article, but in the book he has added that the mysterious encounter with Christ the 'other' needs to be understood ontologically, with relation to "the structure of the relation of the divine and human nature of Christ, which is necessary for the appropriate understanding of the encounter with him". Alexander S. Jensen, *Divine Providence and Human Agency: Trinity, Creation and Freedom* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 21.

transcendence) in Bonhoeffer's Christology should, I argue, take account of the *theologia crucis*, recognising that it is as the particular humiliated one that Jesus transcends, even in the present. This constitutes a much deeper and more paradoxical apophasis—one more truly 'Bonhoefferian'—than the general unknowability of the other person. Therefore, where Clifford Green says that "[t]he form of transcendence is ... human sociality",¹⁶³ we would be better to say that the form of transcendence is the particular union of divine and human in Jesus Christ, in which human sociality participates, receiving his generously given self. Frei's emphasis upon Jesus' unsubstitutability therefore keeps us alert to this central element of particular historicity in Bonhoeffer's *theologia crucis*, allowing us to mine it for a theology of Jesus' transcendence in a particularly nuanced way.

The overemphasis on anthropology can also lead to another related problem that recalls the third stage of Placher's argument (see chapter 2)—insofar as some scholars place Bonhoeffer's 'person centred' account in opposition to what they perceive as a traditional theology of transcendence. Barker, for example, implies that the *pro me* of Christ in a *theologia crucis* stands opposed to a theology of God's wholly-otherness or eternal transcendence,¹⁶⁴ and Green also contrasts transcendence as human sociality with "an inaccessible otherness or beyondness of God."¹⁶⁵ Recalling Placher's suggestion that the contrast between transcendence and God being towards the world is a false dichotomy—the result of reading transcendence through the domesticating filter of modernism—we should challenge this perceived mutual exclusivity of Christ's *pro me* and God's wholly-otherness. Far from endorsing a dichotomy, Bonhoeffer presents us with a *theologia crucis* where the wholly otherness and transcendence of God is one with (not mitigated by) God who is wholly other, and who is *pro me* in the form of the *σκανδαλον* of Christ crucified.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Green, *Bonhoeffer*, 215.

¹⁶⁴ "In every circumstance, God in Christ is the norm and authority standing over against all human thought or ideology. But at the same time, God is not wholly other, so different and distanced from the world as to be removed from it." Barker, *The Cross*, 432 (also 418).

¹⁶⁵ Green, *Bonhoeffer*, 214.

¹⁶⁶ As Ziegler comments, Bonhoeffer resists "defend[ing] divine freedom and majesty by way of an abstract affirmation of divine transcendence," and instead emphasises Christ's promeity as God's "specific relation to the world". Ziegler, 'Christ', 32. In the lectures, Bonhoeffer also explores the 'place' of Christ *pro me*, emphasising a threefold 'being-there' (*Dasein*) for humanity, for history and for nature. In exploring these (history and nature in particular) he again stresses the *σκανδαλον* of the person of Christ, present for us only as the one who is humiliated. Being there for humanity is being at the centre

Overall therefore, Bonhoeffer's theology of Christ *pro me* in Word, sacrament and community fruitfully engages with Frei's thought in the following ways: First of all, Bonhoeffer's emphasis on Christ as *pro nobis* complements Frei's insistence that one cannot speak of the unsubstitutable Christ in isolation from the cultural-linguistic praxis of the community who confess the Lordship of the one narratively attested in the gospels. To give Bonhoeffer's term to Frei, the latter's enquiry into cultural linguistics investigates the way in which the community relates—especially in terms of the *sensus literalis* of scripture—to Christ as *pro nobis*. In short, Frei's cultural linguistics investigate Christ's being *pro nobis*. Secondly, Frei's own emphasis on the *sensus literalis* of scripture in the community prioritises the unsubstitutability of Jesus, and I have been allowing that to alert us to the importance of that unsubstitutability in what Bonhoeffer calls Jesus' '*pro me* structure', warning us away from straying towards generalisation. Finally, along exactly the same lines as that explored above, Bonhoeffer's focus on the incognito of Christ supplements the content of Frei's cultural linguistics, thereby supplementing Frei's contribution to a 'middle way'. Frei's cultural linguistic investigations are the point at which his vision for 'generous orthodoxy' comes into view, and his understanding of theology's 'flexibility' and 'humility' is strengthened and deepened by focus upon Jesus' transcendence *in the hiddenness of humiliation* as Bonhoeffer expresses it. In other words, Bonhoeffer lends a *theologia crucis* to Frei's 'generous orthodoxy' and thus to the question of the 'middle way'. In these three ways, the relationship between Christ's *pro me* structure in Bonhoeffer and Frei's attention to cultural linguistics is fertile ground for constructive comparison.

of human existence as the beginning of the new humanity, yet also as its *boundary*—determining humanity's creatureliness by being the Other in whom their life resides. (C.f. *CF*, 86). Being there for history likewise corresponds to Christ being the center of history, again both as limit and center in an eschatological sense —being the one who is beyond history and also the one who is in history, drawing history to fulfillment in God. "[I]n Christ the messianic expectation of history is crushed as well as fulfilled. It is crushed because its fulfillment is hidden. It is fulfilled because the Messiah has truly come. The meaning of history is swallowed up in an event that takes place in the deepest desolation of human life, on the cross. History finds its meaning in the humiliation of Christ." *B*, 325. Being there for nature is Christ's being the new creation. In the light of his newness, creation is recognized in its old-ness, and encounters its "dim desire to free itself, to make itself into a new creation." *B*, 327. C.f. Romans 8:18–25. Bonhoeffer also reaches back to the notion of Christ present as sacrament, where the corporeal elements are the locus of his redeeming presence for nature. Here Christ is nature's centre—"the mediator between nature and God"—present in, and yet redeeming, fallen nature. *B*, 327.

IV

Critically Evaluating Historicity in the Christology Lectures

In contrast to the above emphases, John Howard Yoder has voiced the criticism that Bonhoeffer's Christology and its subsequent interpreters allow Jesus' particularity to fall out of the picture. I have already proposed that Frei can help to counter this tendency—insofar as the anti-mythical notion of unsubstitutability prevents the themes overtaking the person, pointing us more firmly towards the importance of the gospel narratives—and furthermore I argue below that in comparison with Yoder, Frei is a better corrective companion to Bonhoeffer. In offering greater focus on what he calls unsubstitutability, Frei does not disenfranchise the notion of transcendence in Bonhoeffer's thought, whereas Yoder is in danger of such a move.

Yoder suggests that “to leap ... as does Bonhoeffer, from crib to cross is precisely to leave out of one's Christology the substance of social living in occupied rebellion torn Palestine.”¹⁶⁷ Put in terms of my argument above, Yoder believes that the criticism made of Kierkegaard is true for Bonhoeffer too—that is, that “once history is affirmed, the historical details turn out to be unimportant after all.”¹⁶⁸ Abstract paradoxes of hiddenness, humiliation and of the “intellectual scandal”¹⁶⁹ of revelation, says Yoder, lead Bonhoeffer's interpreters into an internalising ‘logology’ concerned with the psychology of faith, and also lead to a theology of incarnation that “serves as the label for a commitment to the sweeping acceptance of things as they are.”¹⁷⁰ ‘Logology’ affirms things as they are because it considers becoming-human in general terms according to experience of being human, and applies that to Jesus, thus writing an anthropological or socio-political *status quo* onto Christology.

¹⁶⁷ John H. Yoder, ‘The Christological Presuppositions of Discipleship’, in Jens Zimmerman and Brian Gregor (eds.), *Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Social Thought* (Oregon: Pickwick, 2010), 143. Re. *B*, 356.

¹⁶⁸ Yoder, ‘Christological’, 146.

¹⁶⁹ Yoder, ‘Christological’, 147.

¹⁷⁰ Yoder, ‘Christological’, 144–145.

“The *concept* of incarnation serves to support the claim that God asks us to behave that way (the way humans do) for the sake of His presence in the world, presence for which the name of Jesus is a symbol.”¹⁷¹

Yoder, therefore, calls for an externally oriented ‘Jesuology’ wherein the particular events of the gospels dominate. By clinging to a particular person, Jesuology forces socio-political critique in the light of that particular life, rather than an insipid affirmation of all human life in general. ‘Logology’ *per se* says Yoder, is a speculative discipline to be subordinated to the “fact of the incarnation”¹⁷²—the person that Jesus was—if it is not to collapse into banality. It would seem that Yoder wants what Bonhoeffer seemed to want in the lectures—i.e. the priority of the ‘who’ question, so that Christology asks not “whether or how God could or did become man, but what kind of man He chose to be”.¹⁷³ He believes, though, that Bonhoeffer never got to that point, and that a ‘Jesulogical’ gloss is required on the lectures and to Bonhoeffer’s theology in general.

In one sense, Yoder highlights that to which I have drawn argued above—that attention to Jesus’ unsubstitutability, and the recognition that this binds one to the gospel narratives, guides us towards the most fruitful way of reading of Bonhoeffer’s theology. In another, though, Yoder’s criticism masks the importance of the paradoxical incognito of Christ. Suggesting that Bonhoeffer’s lectures serve to point *away* from particularity to this ‘logological’ Christology, Yoder introduces a dichotomy between logology and Jesuology that unbalances our reading in two ways:

Firstly, Bonhoeffer’s rationale expressly forbids a de-particularisation of Christology, especially a reduction of the notions of incognito or hiddenness to no more than the idea that (to quote Johannes Climacus) “the god has been in human form”, or that “the god appeared in the humble form of a servant, lived and taught among us, and then died.”¹⁷⁴ Therefore, the existence of Jesus in the likeness of sinful flesh is expounded with reference to Jesus’ appearance to his contemporaries; his existence as the one hidden in humiliation implies reference to an historical crucifixion; and, as

¹⁷¹ Yoder, ‘Christological’, 145. Italics mine.

¹⁷² Yoder, ‘Christological’, 151.

¹⁷³ Yoder, ‘Christological’, 147.

¹⁷⁴ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical*, 103–104.

Bonhoeffer explicitly says, dogmatics requires Jesus' historical existence as this particular person.¹⁷⁵ 'Logology' is clearly rejected in the priority of 'who' over 'how'. What is required, then, is not a refocus, but a reading onwards on the momentum of what is already said. Yoder does hint that had Bonhoeffer's life not been cut short, he might have developed a more 'Jesulogical' approach in line with his explorations of 'non-religiousness' in the prison letters (see chapter 7) but still suggests that the lectures themselves do not allow dogmatic speculation to be subordinate to "the fact of the incarnation".¹⁷⁶

Secondly, Yoder's suggestion that Bonhoeffer's 'logology' serves to uncritically affirm the *status quo* fails to appreciate how the unavoidable *σκανδαλον* of Christ acts as a challenge not only to politically banal Christology, but also to *any* kind of attempt to build an unquestionable socio-political system upon the identity of Jesus. Where Bonhoeffer recognised, amongst other things, that the historical cross and resurrection stood against modernist reductions of Christ's identity to that which is epistemologically graspable, Yoder himself appeals to the 'fact' of the incarnation as grounds for a concrete socio-political ethic. Christology grounded upon such a 'fact', for Yoder, is about "the whole Jesus, from his desert temptation and Nazareth platform sermon, through his moral teaching and founding of an evangelization movement, to cross and resurrection,"¹⁷⁷ and elsewhere he outlines how Jesus Christ offers a norm for a concrete socio-political ethic, which has the character "not [of] inscrutable paradox but as meaningful affirmation".¹⁷⁸ Bonhoeffer's Christology cannot be reduced to the affirmative in the way that Yoder seems to desire (hence Yoder's unease) but this turns out to be Bonhoeffer's strength, not his weakness. Not only, as we have seen, does he forbid us from deriving Jesus' identity and meaning from his activity alone, but furthermore, his Lutheran and Kierkegaardian roots (modification of the latter notwithstanding) do not allow us to dispense with the paradoxical. As Jens Zimmerman summarises in a similar response to Yoder's argument, "Yoder's hermeneutic is itself open to the danger of literalism, historicism,

¹⁷⁵ B, 329.

¹⁷⁶ Yoder, 'Christological', 154.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1996), 238.

and even certain fundamentalism *because* it wants concreteness”.¹⁷⁹ Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, does not allow such literalism. If what Yoder calls the more ‘logological’ aspects of Bonhoeffer’s Christology are in fact those aspects that most forcefully highlight the paradox of Jesus the *σκανδαλον*, then those aspects are vital for calling into question any kind of grasp of the identity of Jesus. We make, of course, affirmative statements about Jesus’s activity and words that are at the heart of his identity as yielded by the Gospels, and these inform our socio-political praxes—but these do not simply replace the paradoxical with the affirmative, the hidden with the visible, or, to follow the dichotomy to its end, the transcendent with the immanent. Being patterned after Christ is a fragile business. As Anderson is at pains to make clear, even a calling to be patterned after Christ’s humble self-emptying (*kenosis*) could be negatively made into a principle and lose its transcendent dimension.¹⁸⁰ If the theme of the *σκανδαλον* is logological, therefore, then this logology cannot be understood as purveying a *status quo*, because the *σκανδαλον* of Christ hidden in humiliation calls humanity to a posture of humility. In other words, what Yoder labels ‘logological’ in Bonhoeffer is in fact an insistence upon the “irreducible who”¹⁸¹ of Jesus Christ that undermines the human grasp of him, and implicitly criticises a Christology which unquestioningly underwrites a particular socio-political programme. Implying that the systematic elements of the lectures limit transformative encounter with Christ ignores the very element in Bonhoeffer’s Christology that testifies to something at the heart of how Jesus is transformative—i.e. being the transcendent person who encounters us as God, often challenging the *status quo*, but never in such a way that can be pinned down and concretely institutionalised for all time.

¹⁷⁹ Jens Zimmerman, ‘Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christological Humanism’, in Zimmerman and Gregor, *Being Human*, 42.

¹⁸⁰ Anderson suggests that “the assumption of a kenotic way of life on the part of the church in the world occludes the very truth which *kenosis* discloses, and envelopes the ego of the church ever more securely in a posture of humility. A life which is devoted to self-emptying can be a life committed most powerfully to a manner of self-existence. It is most understandable that the natural reaction to a powerful church is a radical call for a power-less church. But, while the way of poverty and powerlessness is indeed a more attractive virtue than a spirit of acquisitiveness and superiority, that way is a temptation because of its very attractiveness ... The question is not, it seems to me, how the church can assume a kenotic way of life ... but, of where one locates the reality of the church itself ... There may well be a genuine kenotic life which *appears* similar to this way of life, but its source and its (ultimate) power comes from another Spirit. In a word, the life of kenotic community is a life of *transcendence*.” Anderson, *Historical*, 230–231.

¹⁸¹ C.f. Muers, *Keeping*, 72.

Granted, Bonhoeffer's Christology would benefit from greater emphasis upon particularity, and Yoder makes very much the same point as Frei when he advocates a 'Jesuology' wherein one understands that "the revelation happened before and outside the believer, in Jesus of Nazareth, and in the apostolic church's appropriation of him in her believing testimony, so that the Gospel events retain a categorical priority over the church's reflection and confession of them".¹⁸² However, the way Yoder labels Bonhoeffer's Christology lectures 'logological' risks sidelining the very character which points to the transcendence of Jesus—itself inseparable from the particularity to which Yoder wants to draw attention—and therefore skewing the emphasis in an opposite direction. Bonhoeffer's dogmatics do the work of pointing to transcendence in a way that Yoder does not. Zimmerman again:

[T]he strength of Bonhoeffer's incarnational Christology lies in the paradox of affirming the concrete precisely *because* affirming the transcendence of the God-man Jesus Christ.¹⁸³

Recall from chapter 5 that both Frei and Bonhoeffer want to counter the reduction of Christology by the modernist epistemology of Culture Protestantism, and it becomes apparent that Frei is a more nuanced critical partner for Bonhoeffer—insisting on unsubstitutability and the importance of the Gospel narratives without implying quite the same thing about 'factuality' as Yoder, or excluding the paradoxical by demoting Bonhoeffer's *theologia crucis*.¹⁸⁴ We can acknowledge Yoder's point, but a more effective way to fill out the implicit particularity in Bonhoeffer is to utilize Frei's emphasis upon the centrality of unsubstitutable identity of Christ as narrated in the Gospels—a narrative which does not enclose, but witnesses to, the transcendent Christ in his irreducible existence.

¹⁸² Yoder, 'Christological', 147.

¹⁸³ Zimmerman, 'Being', 47.

¹⁸⁴ Frei, we have seen, is nervous about the paradoxical, but his own sensibilities are not in opposition to the paradoxical elements of Bonhoeffer's Christology, developed as they are in relation to the 'who' of Christ.

V

Conclusion

At the heart of Bonhoeffer's Christology is the particular 'who' of Christ, the one beyond us in the form of the stumbling block—i.e. the humiliation of sinful flesh. We observed how Frei's emphasis upon Jesus' unsubstitutability arises from an equally firm insistence upon the 'who' question, and that their similarity on this matter serves to highlight Bonhoeffer's implicit recognition of the importance of Jesus' historical particularity (in contrast with Kierkegaard) on the basis of which the paradoxical *σκάνδαλον* of the *theologia crucis* is understood to be an explication of Jesus' transcendence in his historical particularity. In short, Bonhoeffer's work counters domesticated transcendence and epistemological monophysitism with a *theologia crucis*. Reading his lectures in the light of Frei's work, we can say that it is the historically unsubstitutable person, narrated in the Gospels, who is transcendent in the humiliation of sinful flesh. The fact that Christians are held off from 'owning' Christ cannot solely be expressed in terms of general 'otherness', but must be expressed with reference to the paradoxical revelation of God in the crucified and risen Christ.

Furthermore, Bonhoeffer's insistence that we know Christ only as *pro me*—and even then, always as the *σκάνδαλον*—can be joined with Frei's cultural linguistic investigation into the normativity of the unsubstitutable Christ for the community of faith. Where Frei recognises that the *sensus literalis* implies the presence of the risen one to the community, leading to a humble and 'flexible' approach to theology, Bonhoeffer emphasises that as *pro nobis*, this risen one is always Christ incognito in the humiliation of sinful flesh, which furthers the sense of theology's humility by appealing to the paradoxical *theologia crucis*. In other words, Bonhoeffer's *theologia crucis* seasons Frei's generous orthodoxy.

The following chapter looks to *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*, where the paradoxical *theologia crucis* continues to shape Bonhoeffer's theology in various ways—particularly in the cosmic terms of *Ethics* and in terms of the criticism of religion in the letters—and where the complementarity I am suggesting between Frei and Bonhoeffer is further evident.

Chapter 7.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER: CHRISTOLOGY AND TRANSCENDENCE IN *ETHICS* AND *LETTERS AND PAPERS FROM PRISON*

This chapter looks to Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* and his theological letters from prison, continuing to observe the fruitfulness of reading Bonhoeffer alongside Frei on the question of the transcendence of Jesus. I begin with a brief description of the realist cosmic Christology that forms the conceptual framework for *Ethics*. Bonhoeffer understands that the incarnate, crucified and risen Christ constitutes the reality of God's reconciliation of the world to Godself in which human beings are called to participate, labeling this the *Christuswirklichkeit*, or 'Christ-reality'. *Ethics* reflects very much the *theologia crucis* observed in the previous chapter, so following the suggestion above that Frei's concept of unsubstitutability can supplement a reading of the Christology lectures, we recognise again that it is only as the scandalous unsubstitutable one that Jesus constitutes reality. It is only as the unsubstitutable stumbling-block that Jesus transcends.

In *Ethics* Bonhoeffer also introduces a nuanced terminology of 'ultimacy' and 'penultimacy' to describe the eschatological tension in which Christians find themselves, and also to insist upon how a Christological ontology affirms, rather than de-values, the world. Reflecting similar thinking as H. Richard Niebuhr in *Christ and Culture* and Frei in *Types of Christian Theology*, Bonhoeffer recognises that what DeJonge calls "oppositional"¹ thinking about Christ and the world fails to adequately reflect the *Christuswirklichkeit*. What is required is a nuanced ontology where the world finds its true being in Jesus who transcends it. This cosmic Christology complements Frei's

¹ See Michael P. DeJonge, 'Between Fundamentalism and Secularism: Bonhoeffer's Negotiation of Oppositional Pairs in *Ethics* and its precedent in *Act and Being*', in John W. DeGruchy, Stephen Plant, Christiane Tietz (eds.), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology Today: A Way Between Fundamentalism and Secularism?* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 2009), 74.

approach to a Christian affirmation of history, and makes sense as a fleshing out of the high Christology that grounds the *sensus literalis*.²

Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* revisit the theme of domesticated transcendence through the narrative of a modernist obsession with God as a religious stop-gap, in contrast to which he calls Christians to witness to Jesus Christ who is "the human being for others";³ to God's strength in the weakness of the cross; God's transcendence *pro nobis*. Again, a *theologia crucis* is central, and when read with the observations of the previous chapter in mind, these letters offer piercing insights into the paradoxical challenge of true relationship to Jesus Christ, once more filling out Frei's theology with an emphasis upon the difficulty the church cannot avoid as it seeks to embodying faith in the unsubstitutable Jesus of the gospels, especially as regards his transcendence as encountered in and through others.

I

Ethics

Ethics is an incomplete collection of manuscripts penned during Bonhoeffer's involvement with the *Abwehr*—a senior German counter-intelligence agency operating overseas under the guise of apparent Nazi propaganda activities, under whose cover Bonhoeffer made crucial ecumenical contacts and helped Jews escape Germany.⁴ As Rasmussen summarises, "what we have as the book *Ethics* is a posthumous collection of Bonhoeffer's unfinished efforts, written while awaiting travel assignments for the conspiracy".⁵ These manuscripts were never finally redrafted to Bonhoeffer's satisfaction, nor did he definitively order the material. However, in the 1980s, a re-ordering of the work for the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke* edition made the essay 'Christ Reality and the Good' the first chapter, properly highlighting the Christological basis for *Ethics*. Ann Nickson suggests that prior to the new versions, the Christology of

² Hans W. Frei, 'Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal' in Hans W. Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, edited by George Hunsinger and William Placher (Oxford: OUP, 1993), 37.

³ *LPP*, 501.

⁴ See Edwin Robertson, *The Persistent Voice of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Bath: Eagle, 2005), 174–193.

⁵ Larry Rasmussen, 'The ethics of responsible action', in John W. de Gruchy (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 215.

Ethics was “softened by its placement midway through the volume”. Its revised prominence, however, testifies that “Bonhoeffer sees his task as ... a radical re-formulation of the entire basis of Christian ethics in Christological terms.”⁶ This re-formulation is expressed powerfully through the concept *Christuswirklichkeit* (Christ-reality).

i) *Christuswirklichkeit: the cosmic transcendence of Jesus*

Reflecting again his language of the Christological ‘who’, examined in the previous chapter, Bonhoeffer’s explication of *Christuswirklichkeit* forbids one ‘go behind’ God’s reconciling activity in Christ to a more general reality. The reconciliation of the world to God in Christ is the irreducible grounds of all reality and therefore of ethics. *Christuswirklichkeit* does not point to more fundamental questions of ‘good and evil’; rather, those questions are “themselves embedded in a *wholly other* ultimate reality, namely the reality of God the Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer.”⁷ The ‘who’ remains at the centre of Christian ethics.

Therefore *Ethics* also manifests a posture of epistemological humility, because like the Christological question, the ethical question is given its reality from *beyond* itself. In contrast to Kant’s “pure faith of religion”,⁸ Bonhoeffer’s Christianity is not in the service of morality, as if the purpose of the Church’s existence was to point to moral principles more fundamental than Jesus Christ. Rather, questions of ‘good’ are only genuinely real (rather than abstract) when undertaken in relation to God in Christ—because God in Christ *is* the world’s reality. For this reason, ethics is always with reference to and possible only because of the transcendence of God—the *pro nobis* exteriority of God in Christ.⁹ Christian ethics is therefore about Christocentric teleology:

⁶ Ann L. Nickson, *Bonhoeffer on Freedom: Courageously Grasping Reality* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 119.

⁷ *E*, 48. Italics mine.

⁸ Immanuel Kant, ‘Religion within the boundaries of mere reason’ (1793), in Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. Wood and Giovanni (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), 176.

⁹ There is a “connection between God in Christ and all human life which is all-embracing and ontological, and prior to all human thinking, willing and believing” Jürgen Moltmann, ‘The Lordship of Christ and Human Society’, in Jürgen Moltmann and Jürgen Weissbach, *Two Studies in the Theology of Bonhoeffer* (New York: Scribner, 1967), 59.

The ultimate, or final, reality, discloses itself to be at the same time the first reality, God as the first and last, the Alpha and Omega. Without God all seeing and perceiving of things and laws become abstraction, a separation from both origin and goal. All questions of our own goodness, as well as the goodness of the world, are impossible unless we have first posed the question of the goodness of God. For what meaning would the goodness of human beings and the world have without God? Since God, however, as the ultimate reality is no other than the self-announcing, self-revealing God in Jesus Christ, the question of good can only find its answer in Christ.¹⁰

Furthermore, God's reconciling activity in Christ does not make for a supra-mundane reality pertaining to a purely 'spiritual' consciousness, but encompasses the whole world. There are, says Bonhoeffer, "not two realities, but *only one reality*, and that is God's reality revealed in Christ in the reality of the world ... Hence there are not two realms, but only one *the one realm of the Christ-reality [Christuswirklichkeit]*."¹¹ Christ, "the indivisible whole of God's reality"¹² therefore grounds a theological metaphysic, in which, says Zimmerman, Bonhoeffer is "modifying Christologically the theological realism that was taken for granted by classical Christianity and epitomized in the theology of Thomas Aquinas."¹³ Simply, that which is not according to the *Christuswirklichkeit* is not reality, because it is not according to God's work in Christ. In more Thomist terms, that which is not according to the *Christuswirklichkeit* does not participate in the reality that is the world's relationship to God the transcendent creator and redeemer.¹⁴

Therefore, thinking in terms of separate realms (like church and world) is misleading—bound to the sub-reality of the fall—because in Christ all things have been caught up into God's reconciling activity. Realm-thinking (*Raumdenken*) is clumsy, envisioning a battle for space between two opposing realities, "bumping against and

¹⁰ E, 49.

¹¹ E, 58.

¹² E, 53.

¹³ Jens Zimmerman, 'Finitum Capax Infiniti or The Presencing of Christ', in Ralf K. Wüstenberg and Jens Zimmerman (eds.), *God Speaks to Us: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Biblical Hermeneutics* (Frankfurt: Peter Laing, 2013), 86.

¹⁴ "[Bonhoeffer's] ethic is derived from the conviction that 'reality' is complex in its dynamic *participation* in the transcendent simplicity of Christ's personality." Justin Mandela Roberts, *Sacred Rhetoric: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Participatory Tradition* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 19.

repelling each other”.¹⁵ It goes behind God’s reconciling activity in the same way that the ‘how’ question goes behind the ‘who’ of Christ in the Christology lectures. Again, “[t]here are not two realms, but only *the one realm of the Christ reality*”.¹⁶

Even the ‘spheres’ of church and evil, apparently distinct in the New Testament, are only properly conceived in their relation to the one *Christuswirklichkeit*.¹⁷ Firstly, the church occupies ‘space’ in the world not for its own sake, but for the purpose of witnessing to the world’s ultimate reconciled reality.¹⁸ Secondly, the idea that the world is “under the power of the devil”¹⁹ does not refer to a distinct, ontologically stable realm of evil, but rather an illusory sub-reality, or in Augustinian terms, privation.²⁰ As Bonhoeffer explains in a sermon in 1939:

Death and sin puff themselves up and instill fear in humankind, as if they were still the rulers of the world. But it is only an illusion. They have long since lost their power. Jesus has taken it from them.²¹

Although evil’s orientation away from Christ and towards un-reality is anything but imaginary (*Ethics*, as Schlingensiepen describes it, was “‘written and lived’ by turns”²² in the midst of the reality of Nazism) its ultimate power is illusory. The opposition between Christ and evil exists only insofar as “the devil, unwillingly, must serve Christ, and, willing evil, must ever again do good.”²³ Once more the point is teleological: all

¹⁵ *E*, 57. The German *Raum* “holds more explicit spatial connotations than the English rendering ‘realm’ ... There are two distinct spaces that can be seen as confronting each other.” Ulrik Becker Nissen, ‘On Mystery and Reality in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics*’, *Journal of Religious Ethics* (39, 2011), 326–327.

¹⁶ *E*, 58. This exposes Kirkpatrick’s over-simplistic comparison between Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard, in which he says, “[f]or both Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer there are two distinct realms”. Matthew D. Kirkpatrick, *Attacks on Christendom in a World Come of Age: Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer and the Question of ‘Religionless Christianity’* (Oregon: Pickwick, 2011), 124.

¹⁷ *E*, 62.

¹⁸ *E*, 63–64.

¹⁹ *E*, 64.

²⁰ St. Augustine, ‘Confessions’, 7.16 in Mary T. Clark (ed.), *Augustine of Hippo: Selected Writings*, trans. Mary T. Clark (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 7; Matthew Levering, *The Theology of Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013) 100.

²¹ *TEU*, 487.

²² Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906–1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance* (London: T & T Clark, 2012), 250.

²³ *E*, 65.

things are ordered in relation to the only ‘real reality’, the *Christuswirklichkeit*, which exposes as false any dichotomy of world and God—i.e. any *Raumdenken*.

Therefore, ‘ethical’ living is fundamentally participation in world’s continual coming-to-reality—i.e. coming-to-be in Christ in whom it is reconciled with God—and this ontological teleology implies a profoundly biblical eschatological tension whereby the world is *becoming what it truly is*. The term *Christuswirklichkeit*, then, is not static; it implies the ‘now and not yet’ of the Gospel, insofar as it remains for the world to participate in the reality given it by God.²⁴

Bonhoeffer reframes this same eschatological tension in his subsequent and significant discussion of ultimacy and penultimacy. He understands the ultimate (in individual terms God’s justification of the sinner; in cosmic terms the reconciliation of the world to God) as the grounds and goal of the penultimate.²⁵ Penultimate things temporally precede God’s ultimate justification and reconciliation, yet have their place only in their relationship to that ultimacy.²⁶ Bonhoeffer explains this relationship by implying that the instinct to remain silent alongside a grieving person (penultimate activity) is more ‘real’ than offering a word about God’s justification and reconciliation (the ultimate).²⁷ Remaining silent in worldly grief can constitute a more meaningful orientation to the ultimate than quickly pointing beyond the immediate sense of pain and loss to painless eternal life in Christ. This kind of penultimate activity does not constitute God’s reconciliation, but does participate in it and is ordered towards it, being therefore wholly valid in the light of it.

²⁴ “*Wirklichkeit* ... with its root *werken*—to ‘bring about’ or ‘effect’ ... suggest[s] something ‘realized’ or ‘being realized’.” Harold Lockley, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: his Ethics and its value for Christian Ethics Today*, (Swansea: Phoenix, 1993), 17. On ‘now and not yet’ in synoptic terms, see, for example, Morna D. Hooker, *the Gospel According to St Mark* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 57–58. In Pauline terms one considers the ‘groaning of all creation’ as it waits the fullness of its freedom according to God’s work in God’s children (Rom 8:18–23).

²⁵ *E*, 149–150.

²⁶ Pangritz points out the similarity with Barth’s distinction between the *εσχατον* and the “next to the last”. Barth speaks of the *εσχατον* as “*not* the continuation, the result, the consequence, the next step after the next to last, so to speak, *but*, on the contrary, is forever a radical break with everything next to the last; and this is just the secret of its connotation of Origin and its moving power.” Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. D. Horton (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1935), 324, quoted in Andreas Pangritz, *Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000), 65.

²⁷ *E*, 152–153.

As Barry Harvey has recently pointed out, “participation is not a competitive, zero-sum game, as the relation diminishes neither party, and participants actually gain from it.”²⁸ The participatory relationship of penultimacy to ultimacy does not devalue the historical, the transitory, or what we might call the secular, but re-values it in the light of Christ. In other words, as is the case in Frei’s theology too, being in the world is sanctioned and freed in its own wholeness by the transcendence of God in Christ.

In valuing both ultimate and penultimate things, the concept of *Christuswirklichkeit* calls into question what Bonhoeffer calls both “radicalism” and “compromise”—both of which fail to properly relate to God’s transcendence, and that constitute extremes that pertain to the question of a ‘middle way’.²⁹ ‘Radicalism’ concentrates on the ultimate to the devaluation of penultimate things, making Christ “the destroyer and enemy of everything penultimate ... the sign the world is ripe to be consigned to the fire.”³⁰ ‘Compromise’, on the other hand, is life in the penultimate to the exclusion of ultimate things, wherein “the ultimate stays completely beyond daily life and in the end serves only as the eternal justification of all that exists”.³¹ This reflects the deistic tendencies of liberal Culture Protestantism—a domestication of transcendence that imprisons God apart from the world.³² Both radicalism and compromise, therefore, fail because of the mutual exclusivity that they imply between ultimacy and penultimacy. They cannot perceive the union of God and the world in Christ that truly affirms the world, and therefore trade on *Raumdenken*, limiting the transcendence of God in Christ in relation to the whole world, and domesticating God either into the other-worldly or the purely socio-political. As DeJonge says, these “oppositional pairs”,

treat ‘the worldly’ and ‘the Christian’ as distinct, in-principle autonomous realms ... Despite appearing to be drastically different approaches to ethics, sectarianism and secularism share the same fundamental mistake, making a principled distinction between what belongs together in reality, in Christ.³³

²⁸ Barry Harvey, *Taking Hold of the Real: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Profound Worldliness of Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 54.

²⁹ *E*, 159.

³⁰ *E*, 153.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² “Cultural Protestantism makes this-worldliness independent of Christ.” Harvey, *Taking*, 161.

³³ DeJonge, ‘Fundamentalism’, 77.

In contrast, precisely by virtue of his transcendence (his ultimacy) as the one who “reconciles the opposition between God and the world”,³⁴ Jesus Christ affirms the penultimate—the sphere of Christian activity that prepares the way for him who comes from without.³⁵ Penultimacy is always lived in the light of and towards the ultimate. Here we have what Anderson calls “the correspondence between the absolute otherness of God and the utter profaneness of the world.”³⁶ Again, by God’s transcendent act towards and for the world in Christ, the world gains its “authentic secularity”³⁷ as that which is *not* God, yet is created, loved and redeemed by God. God’s ultimate difference from the world grounds the world’s authenticity. Similarly, for Bonhoeffer, the world’s ‘freedom to be’ is not gained either by a radical struggle against the penultimate, nor a compromising relativisation of the ultimate, but by the transcendent activity of God in Christ.

Bonhoeffer’s vision of ultimacy and penultimacy also highlights how the *Christuswirklichkeit* challenges the dichotomy between faith and history—Lessing’s ‘accidental’ and ‘necessary’ truths—according to the cosmic transcendence of Jesus Christ. It is the person of Jesus who causes a re-evaluation of history’s relation to God, rather than historical *Wissenschaft* positioning Jesus in relation to history according to its own concept of rationality. That which Higon observes in Frei—i.e. the development of a Christian historical consciousness in contrast to that characteristic of the critical period—can therefore be found also in Bonhoeffer. Through the concept of *Christuswirklichkeit*, Bonhoeffer connects an alternative historical consciousness, which affirms the world in its historicity, to the transcendent identity of Christ.

Furthermore, Bonhoeffer’s themes of penultimacy and ultimacy share conceptual ground with H. Richard Niebuhr’s idea of ‘Christ the transformer of culture’ in *Christ and Culture*, and also with Frei’s understanding of the relationship between the theology of the Christian community and external academic disciplines in *Types of Christian Theology*. Hale suggests that Bonhoeffer simply trumps Niebuhr’s typology,³⁸

³⁴ DeJonge, ‘Fundamentalism’, 78.

³⁵ *E*, 167.

³⁶ Ray Anderson, *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), 71.

³⁷ Anderson, *Historical*, 60.

³⁸ Lori Brandt Hale, ‘Bonhoeffer’s Christological Take on Vocation’, in Keith L. Johnson and Timothy Larsen (eds.), *Bonhoeffer, Christ and Culture* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2013), 181. See also Harvey, *Taking*,

but in fact Bonhoeffer's concept of ultimacy and penultimacy makes sense as a particularly broad example of the view that Christ is the 'transformer of culture.' Niebuhr's 'transformation view' envisions the world's origin and destiny in Christ, interrupted by the fall but nonetheless redeemed in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ, in whom all things ultimately have their *telos*.³⁹ In *Types*, Frei favours an understanding of the relationship between Christian theology and external disciplines that reflects much of what Niebuhr highlights in describing Christ as culture's transformer. Just as Niebuhr understands the world, and culture specifically, as possessing a goodness which is fulfilled only in relation to God's action in Christ, so Frei perceives disciplines external to the Christian faith as capable of fruitful service when thoughtfully, and often critically, deployed in relation to the ultimate context of the Christian *sensus literalis*—i.e. the normativity of the person of Christ. In particular, I suggest that Bonhoeffer's concept of *Christuswirklichkeit* gives a cosmic Christology that frames the way in which Frei thinks about Jesus' normativity for the way theology relates flexibly to external disciplines. One can therefore include the external disciplines of which Frei speaks in *Types* under Bonhoeffer's category of penultimacy, by virtue of which they are understood to possess their *telos* in the person of Christ, without being evacuated of meaning, or elevated to ultimate status.

Following these suggestions about Bonhoeffer's contribution to a reading of Frei, we therefore find Bonhoeffer offering Frei a participatory ontology with which to frame theology's relationship to external disciplines. As referenced above, Roberts and Harvey (themselves writing from very different confessional settings) as well as Jens Zimmerman have recently highlighted the natural connection between a patristic notion of participation and Bonhoeffer's ethical thought.⁴⁰ Given the ways in which *Ethics* coheres with Frei's concerns, it makes sense to suggest that Frei's work can be effectively communicated within that ontological framework.

163–164, where Harvey seems to misappropriate Niebuhr's view of the relationship between Christ and Culture and then contrast it with Bonhoeffer's.

³⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 191–196.

⁴⁰ Roberts writes within the Radical Orthodoxy tradition; Harvey is Professor at Baylor (Baptist) University in Texas. Re Zimmerman, see Jens Zimmerman, 'Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christological Humanism', in Jens Zimmerman and Brian Gregor (eds.), *Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Social Thought* (Oregon: Pickwick, 2010), 33.

Overall, the transcendent person of Christ grounds the relationship between ultimacy and penultimacy, in the light of which neither extremes of arrogant radicalism nor banal compromise are plausible. Keith Clements summarises effectively:

The churches are rightly concerned to retain their identity and calling as witnesses to the gospel of Christ in its specificity and finality. But, unsure of their status in a secular and pluralist society, they are susceptible to two temptations: either, to retreat from the world as it is in to a self-enclosed space in which the absolute verities can be contemplated and enjoyed in unchallenged fashion; or, to seek to impose directly what they regard as these absolute truths on the world around them. Bonhoeffer's full-blown recognition of the ultimate, yet of the rights of the penultimate realm as the place where the coming of the ultimate requires patient preparation, remains crucial for preserving that space in the public realm where faith can be in dialogue with all who seek justice, peace and human fulfillment and dignity.⁴¹

ii) *Christuswirklichkeit and Jesus' particularity*

God affirms history (we might say God says 'yes' to it) by taking on particular historical existence, binding divine revelation to the historical world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, in and through whose life, death and resurrection God reconciles the world to Godself. Crucially then, God's reconciliation is brought about not only for the world, but also in the world. The historicity of God's reconciling activity cannot be abstracted from its meaning *per se*, for God's saving act is the historical cross and resurrection of Jesus. Again recalling the 1933 lectures, the 'who' comes before the 'how', and in Frei's terms, the meaning *is* that which is narrated. Ethically, Jesus' historicity does not function as a mythological signpost to an a-historical 'goodness' (that human beings need to apply or realise in concrete situations) but as the grounds of what is good.⁴² As Holmes summarises, "[t]ruth is indeed identical to a very

⁴¹ Keith Clements, 'Public Ethics and the Reception of Bonhoeffer in Britain', in Clifford Green and Guy Carter (eds.), *Interpreting Bonhoeffer: Historical Perspectives, Emerging Issues* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 32.

⁴² "Reconciled reality as revealed in Jesus Christ is *good*. Indeed, God, the good and real are essentially one. This means that what is good is what is real, and that it is ... determined by God himself and is to be identified with the person and work of his Son." Christopher Holmes, 'The Indivisible Whole of God's Reality': On the Agency of Jesus in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* (12, 2010), 285.

particular person, Jesus the Christ, and to his ministry, cross, resurrection, ascension and session”.⁴³

We therefore encounter a paradox: history has its meaning both in that which happens within it, and that which is thoroughly beyond it. Though the Son of God is beyond the world, God incarnate in Jesus Christ reconciles the world to God from within the world. God’s exteriority operates internally. The ‘authentic secularity’ that re-evaluates the faith/history dichotomy is therefore grounded by Jesus’ particularity *and* transcendence. Furthermore, just as in the Christology lectures Bonhoeffer considers the particularity of Jesus according to the paradox of God’s revelation in hiddenness of the crucified Christ, so here it is as the crucified and risen one—the *σκανδαλον*—that Jesus ontologically grounds ethics. As Kohler says, “the ‘who’ that is the basis of our reality is revealed to us in the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ”.⁴⁴

In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer recapitulates a threefold Christological scheme of incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection to explicate this ‘who’.⁴⁵ To understand the *Christuswirklichkeit*, Bonhoeffer says,

[a]bove all we must turn our eyes to the image of Jesus Christ’s own body—the one who became human, was crucified and is risen. In the body of Jesus Christ, God is united with humankind, all humanity is accepted by God.⁴⁶

This threefold Christological identity—the incarnate, crucified and risen one—is then explored more fully in the section entitled ‘Ethics as Formation’. There, Bonhoeffer takes as his heading Pilate’s words ‘*ecce homo*’ (‘behold the man’)⁴⁷ and reflects sequentially on Jesus as incarnate, crucified and risen. At the heart of his reflections lie the familiar themes of Luther’s *theologia crucis*, for in Jesus Christ, “[i]n an incomprehensible reversal of all righteous and pious thought, God declares himself as

⁴³ Christopher Holmes, *Ethics in the Presence of Christ* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 66.

⁴⁴ R. F. Kohler, ‘The Christocentric Ethics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* (23, 1970), 39.

⁴⁵ Here Bonhoeffer reflects in more expansive form emphases found in chapter 10 of *Discipleship*. Especially *D*, 213–216.

⁴⁶ *E*, 66.

⁴⁷ John 19:5. NRSV: “Here is the man.”

guilty toward the world and thereby extinguishes the guilt of the world ... God takes responsibility for godlessness, love for hate, the holy one for the sinner.”⁴⁸ Once more Bonhoeffer alludes to theses §19 and §20 from Luther’s Heidelberg disputations, recognising that God is not to be found except through the “humiliation and shame of the cross.”⁴⁹

As the *incarnate one*, Jesus Christ embodies God’s love for the world, and real human beings in the midst of that world. Antithetical to Nazi super-humanism, Jesus Christ comes to human beings as they are, in sinful flesh, enacting God’s love for all humanity “without distinction”.⁵⁰ Nearly three decades later, Moltmann would offer a powerful summary of that to which Bonhoeffer points here, describing how God in Christ,

embodied the secret, ‘God with us’, ‘God for us’, on earth in such a way that he became brother to the wretched. For this reason the rejected and outcasts come to him out of the holes and corners into which good society has driven them.⁵¹

In Jesus the *crucified one* humanity knows both God’s judgment and peace with God. “Only as judged by God can human beings live before God; only the crucified human being is at peace with God.”⁵² The judgement of divine love as revealed and embodied in Jesus’ being-for humanity is the basis on which human beings can ‘stand’ before God. In Christ, God judges humanity and declares them righteous only according to God’s love, not according to either their success or failure. As we would expect, here Bonhoeffer points again to the *theologia crucis* that dominates his Christology:

⁴⁸ *E*, 83.

⁴⁹ Martin Luther, ‘Heidelberg Disputation’, in Timothy F. Lull (ed.), *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 44.

⁵⁰ *E*, 84. “The message of God’s becoming human attacks the heart of an era when contempt for humanity or idolization of humanity is the height of all wisdom ... At such a time the tyrannical despiser of humanity makes use of the meanness of the human heart” *E*, 85–86.

⁵¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Man: Christian Anthropology in the Conflicts of the Present*, trans. John Sturdy (London: SPCK, 1974), 18.

⁵² *E*, 88. Also *D*, 215.

This is how the reconciler of the world appears, upon whom humanity's guilt has fallen, pushing Christ into shame and death under God's judgement ... Only by executing God's judgement on God can peace grow between God and the world, between human and human.⁵³

As the *risen one*, Jesus Christ comes through judgment and death, embodying God's 'yes' for the new humanity on the other side of death—a humanity into which all are welcomed. This frees earthly (penultimate) life from the burden of bearing eternity, enabling human beings to live in an oftentimes ambiguous day-to-day, yet knowing that life's endurance belongs in the one who has not circumvented death, but is present as the risen one. The reality of new humanity is established, even though human beings are yet to participate fully in it. "The night is not yet over, but the day is already dawning."⁵⁴

Humanity and the world thus receive reality according to the incarnate, crucified and risen one in his historical unsubstitutability. This threefold description must not be generalised, as if incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection were simply general 'themes' embodied by Jesus and then applied to ethics. As *Discipleship* also emphasises, the acceptance, judgement and reconciliation of humankind and the world is inseparable from Jesus' own *body*.⁵⁵ Bonhoeffer's emphasis on the historical activity of God in Christ as constituting the centre of history and of ethics (recall, above, "the love really lived in Jesus Christ")⁵⁶ warns against generalised readings of his explications of the identity of Jesus in *Ethics*. As he puts it in a manuscript included later in the volume,

Good is historical action that receives its laws of historical action from the center of history. Since it is true that God became human in Jesus Christ, that God entered history, so that he born was at the time of Emperor Augustus, when Quirinius was governor of Syria, that he was man during the time of the emperor Tiberius, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate—then this is the point where the very nature of history must reveal itself to us.⁵⁷

⁵³ *E*, 88.

⁵⁴ *E*, 92.

⁵⁵ *D*, 214–216. Bonhoeffer also emphasises the bodily community of Jesus' first disciples. "The bond between Jesus and the disciples who followed him was a bodily bond ... They live and suffer in bodily community with Jesus." *D*, 215.

⁵⁶ *E*, 83.

⁵⁷ *E*, 228.

Complementing our reading of the Christology lectures, then, the ontological foundation for ethics is Christ who is transcendent and at the ‘centre of history’ precisely *in* his scandalous particularity. Christopher Holmes, whose *Ethics in the Presence of Christ* is one of the few works to explicitly employ both Bonhoeffer’s and Frei’s Christological terminology, summarises thus:

How indeed can an unsubstitutable happening like the resurrection of Jesus be regarded as constitutive of reality? The scandal of the Christian Gospel is that the empty tomb and resurrection appearances are concrete declarations which bring one into communion with new reality.⁵⁸

The unsubstitutable Jesus is the one in whose reconciliation human beings are called to participate if they wish to live according to ‘good’. We move therefore to consider more specifically that participatory aspect of *Ethics*, exploring what it means to say that Christians participate in the form of the unsubstitutable one.

iii) *Taking the form of the transcendent Christ*

Human beings are “invited to participate in the reality of God and reality of the world at the same time”,⁵⁹ and therefore to take the form of Christ by being in the world towards the other. Christian ethics is grounded not in abstract principles of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ but in the particular and definitive being-for-others (*pro me*) of Christ—a conformation to the particular person. Freed from abstraction, Christians are called to act responsibly towards the other, the neighbour, in the midst of the complexity of the world.⁶⁰ Everyone remains a ‘who’; there are no generalisations—not Jesus, not myself, not the other(s) towards whom I act and in whom I meet Jesus.

This constitutes more than exemplarism, as if Christ were someone in the past to be imitated in the present. As Holmes puts it, ethical acts are “acts that, one hopes, are acts participant in the presence of the hypostatic union of God and humanity in Jesus

⁵⁸ Holmes, *Ethics*, 35.

⁵⁹ *E*, 55. “[E]thics in the presence of Jesus is ethics in accord with his promeity ... this is the way in which his person is *pro nobis*.” Holmes, *Ethics*, 91.

⁶⁰ Ethical activity is “risked in faith” in amongst the ambiguity of the “historical situation”. *E*, 221. Recall the Christology lectures regarding history’s ambiguity. *B*, 309.

Christ”,⁶¹ such that “Jesus’ contemporary ministry, the ministry of him who is really One with us in our humanity, that grounds ethics and is the place from which ethics proceeds and by which it is sustained.”⁶² Recalling both Frei and Bonhoeffer, Holmes recognises that if Jesus is at the core of Christian ethics as the unsubstitutable one, then he is at that core as the *living* one.⁶³

Bonhoeffer recalls the concept of vicarious representative action (*Stellvertretung*) from *Sanctorum Communio*, as the pivot for explaining how ethical action—which he understands as responsible action for the other in the concrete⁶⁴—is a participation in *Christuswirklichkeit*, which as we know is participation in the particularity of Christ.

Jesus Christ is the very embodiment of the person who lives responsibly ... His entire life, action, and suffering is vicarious representative action. As the one who has become human he stands in the place of all human beings ... All human responsibility is rooted in the real vicarious representative action of Jesus Christ on behalf of all human beings ... It is only on this ground that there is genuine vicarious representative action and thus responsible action.⁶⁵

The particular activity of God in Christ thus concretises and gives the ontological ground for human activity in accordance with reality. Jesus took responsibility for human guilt and sin and bore it vicariously upon the cross, and in doing so, becomes guilty in solidarity with guilty humankind for our salvation.⁶⁶ Indeed, on the basis of this activity, human responsibility towards the other in the concreteness of historical life often involves both “*willingness to become guilty*” as well, ultimately, as *freedom* from fear of becoming guilty.⁶⁷ Freed from the preciousness of adhering to a general principle like truthfulness (Bonhoeffer contrasts his view with Kant, who would have us give up a hiding friend to a murderer who enquired if the friend were inside) human beings live genuinely towards the other.⁶⁸

⁶¹ Holmes, *Ethics*, 13.

⁶² Holmes, *Ethics*, 15.

⁶³ “Exemplarism ... trades upon principles and a dead Jesus.” Holmes, *Ethics*, 24.

⁶⁴ *E*, 266.

⁶⁵ *E*, 231–232.

⁶⁶ *E*, 233.

⁶⁷ *E*, 275, 279.

⁶⁸ *E*, 279–80.

Recall from chapter 6 Jennifer McBride's explication of Christian public witness specifically with reference to Christ's becoming guilty for us. There, the representative aspects of the *theologia crucis* highlighted in *Ethics* are at the heart of her vision for confident yet humble witness. We are free "for responsible action and for the other", not "from the cross itself. Christian freedom necessitates conforming to the goodness and righteousness of Jesus 'who entered into community with the guilt of other human beings.'"⁶⁹ Witness envisaged as taking the form of the repenting Christ, she contends, is particularly resistant to being distorted into arrogant or self-justifying religiosity: "A God who accepts responsibility for sin and calls followers into conformation is decisively free from religious manipulation and control."⁷⁰ Here then, McBride links Jesus' evasion of manipulation with his being the crucified one, and as we have emphasised throughout, especially through reading Frei alongside Bonhoeffer, Jesus is only the crucified one as particular, unsubstitutable human being, who cannot be generalised or encapsulated in concepts, but only encountered as the same one whose identity is narrated in the gospels. Yet what should underpin the kind of suggestion McBride makes is not just the idea of taking responsibility for sin, but that the one to whom we conform by taking responsibility ourselves is the *transcendent* God-human narrated in the gospels, whose identity can never be resolved into our own. As suggested in the previous chapter, without this kind of emphasis upon transcendence, even taking responsibility for sin can be systematized and distorted.⁷¹

It is crucial, therefore, to emphasise that a human 'becoming guilty for others' is not identical to Jesus' *Stellvertretung*, but only indirectly participates in it. Bonhoeffer says,

Only where a person becomes guilty out of love and responsibility does their action have a part in the justification pertaining to Jesus Christ's sinless guilt-bearing. What remains is the qualitative difference between the essential sinless-ness of Jesus' willingness to become guilty and the universal contamination of all human action by original sin.⁷²

⁶⁹ McBride, *The Church*, 82–83. Quote from *E*, 276.

⁷⁰ McBride, *The Church*, 83.

⁷¹ Muers puts it well: "It is easy to identify, in Bonhoeffer's work, practices and ways of life that can be described as life 'conformed to Christ'. Even these, however, could be misunderstood as guidelines for a project of personal or institutional self-creation. The cross can be estheticized, or made the basis for an uncritical affirmation of the demands of particular 'victims;' any given understanding of 'conformity to Christ' is open to suspicion." Muers, *Keeping*, 84

⁷² *E*, 235

Ultimately, for Bonhoeffer, Jesus' action as God towards us in history is the ontological foundation for our living responsibly towards God and neighbour even in the midst of our own sinfulness; but at the same time his constitutive being for others is about his being distinct, transcendent. He can only be completely *pro nobis*, and only completely constitute our being for others, as the one who is utterly *different* from us. As remarked in the previous chapter, conformation to a particular way of being—even as admirable as a posture of repentance—can always be generalised and even manipulated. Therefore, human beings can participate in the reality of the sinless one who became sin for us, but must recognise that such participation always requires a posture of repentance *and* a recognition of his transcendence. The historical particularity and uniqueness of the crucified and risen Christ grounds human participation in God's good reality. Describing what it means for Christian life and Christian action to be 'in Christ', Bonhoeffer says, "[l]ife is not a thing, an essence, or a concept, but a person—more specifically, a particular and unique person ... My life is another, a stranger Jesus Christ."⁷³

The concept of the 'stranger' encapsulates how binding Christian ethics to the person of Christ never delivers that person—who is uniquely and 'transcendently' God incarnate—into our hands. This 'slipperiness' of Christ is one with his being *incognito*. The one whose identity constitutes the world's reconciled reality, whose form Christians take in responsible action towards the other—is the transcendent 'who' of the Christology lectures—the Word of God incarnate, hidden in the *σκανδαλον* of the gospel.

Again, this time with reference to human participation in Christ, I suggest that Bonhoeffer's participatory ontology in *Ethics* can supplement Frei's theology of the normativity of the person of Christ for the church, but I also suggest that, in turn, Bonhoeffer's ontology can benefit from Frei's explication of figural reading. Firstly, we notice that both theologians concentrate on how Christians are called to pattern their individual and corporate lives in accordance with Jesus Christ. For Bonhoeffer, participation in *Christuswirklichkeit*, positioned as it is against generalisation and towards the multifaceted concreteness of life in the world, plays out not into ethical principles,

⁷³ *E*, 249.

but into humble ethical flexibility characterised by asking ‘what is the will of God?’⁷⁴ Christians are never excused from having to ask and discern the will of God; they must dismiss the illusion of their own ‘knowledge of good and evil’, looking only to Christ as the personal grounds for responsible living.⁷⁵ Frei, for his part, explicates the *sensus literalis* of the church as grounded in the identity of the risen Christ, in relation to whom general theories are subordinated. He describes the practice of figural reading whereby not only are the scriptures interpreted with reference to Christ as their *telos*, but also the lives of individual Christians and their particular communities are ‘read’ in the light of God’s activity towards the world in Christ. It is not much of a step, therefore, to see Frei’s cultural linguistic commentary on the church’s hermeneutical praxis as complementing, perhaps ‘belonging in’, Bonhoeffer’s Christological ontology.

Beyond this similarity, we note firstly that Bonhoeffer’s reflections on the form of Christ as the incarnate, crucified and risen one can once more supplement Frei’s work as regards the *σκανδαλον* of the gospel. That aspect of Bonhoeffer’s work which is so important for McBride—the call to take the form of the one who becomes guilty for others—functions as a deeper reflection upon the problematic of Jesus’ transcendence than Frei gives. Bringing Bonhoeffer’s theology, in particular McBride’s reflections upon it, to Frei’s concept of figural reading (which itself has participatory implications) allows us to highlight the following: figural reading should be understood not as a platitudinous identification with another world—an escapist strategy—but rather a call to complex, mysterious and often difficult conformation to and participation in Jesus Christ in his scandalous particularity. Bonhoeffer’s cosmic Christological is therefore a rich context for Frei’s approach to figural reading.

In reverse, though, Frei’s elucidation of figural reading points towards a helpful clarification for Bonhoeffer’s doctrine of *Christuswirklichkeit*, for figural reading as Frei understands it accounts for the way in which the historical reality prior to the incarnation can still be said to have its reality in Christ. The need for this clarification arises from Bonhoeffer’s insistence on Christ as history’s centre, in abstraction from whose becoming-human, reality cannot be lived in (“in Christ, all human reality is

⁷⁴ *E*, 297.

⁷⁵ *E*, 323. See *CF*, 113.

taken on. That is why it is ultimately only in and from Christ that it is possible to act in a way that is in accord with reality”).⁷⁶ Unless one can account for the meaningful relationship of pre-incarnation history to Christ, then the doctrine of *Christuswirklichkeit* is in danger of implying that action in accordance with God’s reality was impossible for people prior to the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. Figural reading—which for Frei is always a *practice* and not a theory—offers the means by which these connections can be made.

Although Bonhoeffer practices figural reading elsewhere in his work, he is less attentive to explicating the importance of the historical particularity of the ‘type’ than Frei is. For example, a study of King David (1935) focusses on how David prefigures Christ by virtue of the former’s anointing, his persecution by the world, his servant kingship, and his existence as forgiven sinner (in which Bonhoeffer links David’s punishment and forgiveness with the life-giving punishment for sin that falls upon God in the cross of Christ). Bonhoeffer also links the sinful flesh into which David’s son Solomon is born with the form of sinful flesh in which God in Christ is incarnate.⁷⁷ As Harvey notes, he makes efforts to “posit a real connection grounded in the revelatory activity of God in Christ between the people and events narrated in the Old Testament and those in the Germany of his day”.⁷⁸ In all this, though, in contrast to Frei’s point that figural reading need not overrule the particularity of the person or event narrated, Bonhoeffer states that “David is important only insofar as he is a witness to Christ, not *in and for himself*, but for Christ and thus for the church of Christ.”⁷⁹ Frei, on the other hand, stressed that figural reading maintains the typological significance of a person or event without overriding their “independent or

⁷⁶ *E*, 224.

⁷⁷ *TEF*, 875–891. See also Pangritz, Andreas, ‘Who is Jesus Christ for us today?’ in De Gruchy (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 145–148. As regards the form of sinful flesh, “Solomon comes from the sinful flesh of David and Bathsheba, but he is also the son on whom God’s peace now rests. The seed of David who is to bear his promise comes into this world in the flesh of sin, ἐν τῷ ὁμοιώματι σαρκὸς (Rom 8:3), but as the king of peace.” *TEF*, 889.

⁷⁸ Harvey, *Taking*, 227.

⁷⁹ *TEF*, 874. Plant comments upon the hermeneutical ‘Christ-monism’ of portions of *Ethics*, which also could be mitigated somewhat by introducing Frei’s nuanced view of figural reading as described above. Stephen Plant, *Uses of the Bible in the Ethics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, PhD thesis (Cambridge University: UK, 1993), 143–145. Earlier in the thesis, Plant suggests that Bonhoeffer’s approach to scripture, especially insofar as it focusses upon the *Gestalt* of Christ, fits fairly well under Frei and Tanner’s descriptions of the *sensus literalis*/plain sense. Plant, *Uses*, 109–111.

self-contained status.”⁸⁰ Figural reading, as Frei understands it, maintains that a person or event is meaningful in its own right whilst nevertheless being “incomplete, and thus ‘figures’ of the event-and-or-meaning that fulfills them”.⁸¹

In order to allow for the integrity of the world that Bonhoeffer prizes so highly in *Ethics*, we therefore do better to follow Frei’s theory of figural reading rather than Bonhoeffer’s. Pangritz suggests that Bonhoeffer’s “expropriation of the Jewish Bible” in his Christological reading of David is “corrected and even reversed” in his later work,⁸² and along these lines one may also observe that the somewhat ambiguous approach to David’s historicity—cast into relief by Frei’s emphasis upon the importance of the type in their own right—sits uneasily with Bonhoeffer’s later emphasis on worldliness. In short, then, Frei’s account of the practice of *figura* assists reflection upon the *Christuswirklichkeit* in a better way than Bonhoeffer’s earlier practice, because the former holds on to the integrity of the historical in a way that turns out to be vital for *Ethics*, but is not explicated in that work. The way Frei describes figural reading complements Bonhoeffer’s thought about ultimacy and penultimacy, in a way that Bonhoeffer’s own figural reading from earlier in his career does not. Frei’s tightly focussed hermeneutical project thus contributes valuably to Bonhoeffer’s cosmic theological vision.

In *Types of Christian Theology* Frei was interested the way in which the *sensus literalis* works out into a flexible and humble theology, and this image of ‘flexibility’ can also serve as a description of Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics*. It is not that his reflections are less than robust, but rather that they refuse to allow generalisations to overtake the transcendent unsubstitutability of the one at the centre of history, Jesus Christ. Frei’s Christology drives his capacity to generate theological flexibility that makes for a ‘middle way’, and this is the case for Bonhoeffer too, who says,

The origin of action that is in accord with reality is neither the pseudo-Lutheran Christ whose only purpose is to sanction the status quo, not the radical revolutionary Christ of all religious enthusiasts who are supposed to bless every

⁸⁰ Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 28.

⁸¹ Hans W. Frei, ‘The Literal reading of the Biblical Narrative: Does it Stretch or will it Break?’, in Hans W. Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), 121.

⁸² Pangritz, ‘Who is Jesus Christ’, 147–148.

revolution, but rather the God who became human, Jesus Christ who loved human beings, judged them and reconciled them with God.⁸³

For both Frei and Bonhoeffer, the transcendence of the person of Jesus, explicated always in relation to his historical, and non-mythical unsubstitutability, resides at the heart of a generous orthodoxy that counters extreme open-ness or closed-ness.

iv) *Summary*

Jesus Christ's cosmic transcendence, in light of which the world is given its reality and affirmed in its penultimacy, turns not only upon God-in-Christ's divine exteriority—though that is fundamental—but also upon the paradoxes of a *theologia crucis*.

Bonhoeffer's call for participation in *Christuswirklichkeit* is always about the paradoxical relationship of Christians to the Christ who is with us as one who is other than us, and who is hidden from us in his *incognito*. In other words, Bonhoeffer's cosmic Christology leads to an ethics of a *theologia crucis*. Furthermore, the participatory ontology in *Ethics*—particularly apparent in the concepts of ultimacy and penultimacy—provides an attractive metaphysical framework in which to place Frei's theological understanding of faith and history (particularly the retention of history's 'authenticity') and of the Christological *sensus literalis* and figural reading. The normativity of the person of Christ is seen to shape the church according to the transcendent, scandalous, and unsubstitutable identity of Christ. In turn Frei also offers a useful resource to readers of *Ethics*: the potential for Bonhoeffer's *Christuswirklichkeit* to imply a problem as regards living 'in reality' *before* the time of Jesus of Nazareth is mitigated somewhat if Frei's understanding of figural reading is taken hold of to think through historical reality before Christ. Finally, in the light of *Ethics*, the two theologians complement each other as regards ethical and theological flexibility in the light of the transcendent Jesus Christ. The thrust of Bonhoeffer's thinking—away from generalised ethics towards a flexible ethic of responsible action—compliments the way in which the hermeneutical normativity of Christ in Frei's theology makes for a generous orthodoxy.

⁸³ *E*, 224.

II

Letters and Papers from Prison

Largely on account of his activities with the Confessing Church and the illegal Finkenwalde seminary for pastors opposed to the German Christian movement, in September 1940 Bonhoeffer was forbidden to speak in public, and in March 1941 publication of his writings was made illegal. The exposure of the *Abwehr* early in 1943 led to a series of arrests, and Bonhoeffer was arrested on 31st March 1943 and taken to an interrogation prison in Tegel, Berlin.⁸⁴ A trial and perhaps even subsequent release was expected in late 1943, but the public failure of an attempt to assassinate Hitler in July 1944 implicated friends, co-conspirators and Bonhoeffer himself. In October 1944 he was transferred to a Gestapo prison and from there, in February 1945, to Buchenwald. In April 1945 he was taken to Flossenbürg, where on 9th April he was hanged for treason.

Bonhoeffer's letters from prison do not yield polished theological arguments, but witness to the trajectories along which his theology was developing during the final months of his life. Their fragmentariness and intimacy gives them a character that Bonhoeffer himself valued.⁸⁵ They evidence a dynamic high point (but not a brand new departure) in his critique of modernity and his call for Christian witness to be grounded in the scandalous form of the crucified and risen Christ—the one who transcends the world by being in the midst of the world. Coining phrases such as 'the world's coming of age', 'religionless Christianity' and 'beyond in the midst', Bonhoeffer develops a compelling narrative of the way the problem of transcendence is exposed by late modernity, and how this exposure forces Christians back to considering the paradoxes of relationship with the transcendent Jesus.

This section draws together two salient motifs as they are related thematically, rather than strictly chronologically. First, we consider what Bonhoeffer calls humanity's 'coming of age', and the consequent demise of a *deus ex machina*—a 'god' who exists to

⁸⁴ See Roberston, *The Persistent Voice*, 192–193.

⁸⁵ "By the way, it would be very nice if you didn't throw away my theological letters ... One writes some things in a more uninhibited and lively way in a letter than in a book" *LPP*, 458.

solve human problems.⁸⁶ Religion that seeks to preserve this ‘god of the gaps’ fails to connect with all of human life, and by pointing this out, Bonhoeffer exposes the problematic mutual exclusivity of transcendence and historicity in the theology that characterises liberal modernity. Here Bonhoeffer’s work is in agreement with Frei’s observations in *Eclipse* and beyond. Secondly, I explain Bonhoeffer’s alternative to such thinking—i.e. the gospel of the crucified and risen Christ who is transcendent in the midst of the world, which calls for a ‘non-religious’ approach to Christian faith and activity. Here the *theologia crucis* presented in the Christology lectures reappears with new force. Rather than advocating a 1960s style secularisation, Bonhoeffer’s ‘non-religiousness’ brings to light the paradoxical transcendence of the crucified and risen Jesus, and the call for Christians to participate in God’s being for others, which is described as ‘sharing in the sufferings of God’. This particular aspect of Bonhoeffer’s theology brings us into contact with what appear to be Hans Frei’s only published comments on Bonhoeffer, where Frei himself does not seem to appreciate much of the potential for Bonhoeffer’s work to motivate and supplement his own Christological critique of modernity. In contrast, I will be suggesting that ‘religionless Christianity’ in fact offers a critical framework akin to Frei’s own sensibilities and has the potential to deepen Frei’s own reflections on the character of the normativity of Christ for the church.

i) ‘Coming of age’ and domesticated transcendence

From 30th April 1944 onwards, Bonhoeffer’s theological letters to Eberhard Bethge reflect upon the question, “what is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today”.⁸⁷ Although it represents a probing insight into his own cultural-intellectual milieu, Bonhoeffer’s ‘for us today’ in the letters is misapplied if it leads to conveniently reimagining Jesus’ identity according to one’s own context. As should be apparent from chapter 6, ‘for us’ does not mean something relative, like ‘to my mind’, but rather refers to God’s *pro nobis*—God being *for us*—in the specific ‘who’ of Jesus Christ.

⁸⁶ *Deus ex machina*: ‘God out of the machine’. John de Gruchy summarises: “[I]n ancient theatre this was a figure who could be made to appear ‘suddenly’ with the help of a mechanical device and to solve problems ‘supernaturally’.” *LPP*, 366 n.25. Following Wüstenberg, I accept the virtual interchangeability of phrases ‘*deus ex machina*’, ‘god of the gaps’, and ‘God as a working hypothesis’. Ralph K. Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Religionless Christianity* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998), 23.

⁸⁷ *LPP*, 362.

As Ziegler points out, the “concreteness Bonhoeffer himself consistently coveted” is not achieved by “constant re-imaginings of Jesus Christ in ways relevant to our shifting circumstances”, for this becomes merely “deeply self-interested and self-involving”.⁸⁸ Rather, “the promise of Christ grounds the concreteness of revelation and redemption in Christ’s own person, rather than in any subjective capacity we might have to appropriate his value in and from our personal and communal contexts.”⁸⁹ In short, as I have been emphasising, Christ’s *pro me* is about the transcendence of Jesus. Asking how Christianity thinks of Christ and responds to Christ ‘today’, Bonhoeffer emphasises a commitment to the gospel of the crucified and risen Christ, who though beyond us is *pro nobis* in being rejected, executed and resurrected.

Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer does offer an analysis of his own ‘today’, suggesting that a ‘religious’ age is at an end. People, he says, are unable and/or unwilling to engage with the particular type of religious or theological language that pervaded nineteenth and early twentieth century Christianity. The idea of a “religious *a priori*” (that human beings are by definition ‘religious’) no longer works, for “[w]e are approaching a completely religionless age; people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore.”⁹⁰ There may be a minority who, in their “hour of weakness”,⁹¹ can be convinced to be ‘religious’—something Bonhoeffer finds distasteful—but overall, religion is perceived as irrelevant for everyday living. Crucially though, the reason for this is not because the Christian idea of God lacks meaning for a contemporary rational world, but because the idea of God in the ‘religion’ that people are rejecting is not the Christian God at all.

Religious people speak of God at a point where human knowledge is at an end (or sometimes when they’re too lazy to think further) or where human strength fails. Actually, it’s a *deus ex machina* that they’re always bringing on the scene, either to appear to solve insoluble problems or to provide strength when

⁸⁸ Philip Ziegler, ‘Christ For Us Today: Promise in the Christologies of Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* (15, 2013), 25.

⁸⁹ Ziegler, ‘Christ’, 34.

⁹⁰ *LPP*, 362. Whilst Bonhoeffer suggests, perhaps erroneously, that the entirety of Christian tradition is built upon the assumption of this ‘religious a priori’, his critique actually pertains more to the way this ‘a priori’ is more symptomatic of modernist epistemology than Christian theology as a whole.

⁹¹ *LPP*, 363. “[S]hould we jump on a few unfortunates in their hour of weakness and commit, so to speak, religious rape?” *Ibid.*

human powers fail, thus always exploiting human weakness or human limitations. Inevitably that lasts only until human beings become powerful enough to push the boundaries a bit further and God is no longer needed as a *deus ex machina*.⁹²

The ‘religiousness’ that is being rejected, as Bonhoeffer understands it, is epitomised by a domesticated transcendence—a theological approach that “allowed the world the right to assign to Christ his place within it”⁹³ (for Kant, we recall, God functions as little more than a necessary grounding for a moral society).⁹⁴ The domesticated God (the *deus ex machina*) is a mere tool to be deployed in cases of human unknowing, where the concept of universal reason seems to run out—the irony being that God as conceived within structure of rationalism is growingly irrelevant as that rationalism itself progresses: late modernity is progressively rejecting its own God.

Bonhoeffer calls this situation a ‘coming of age’,⁹⁵ and uses this language about growth into adulthood and independence to describe something ultimately positive. However, coming of age is not about a self-sufficiency by virtue of which human beings refuse to believe in the Christian God anymore. Unlike Kant—for whom the enlightenment was humanity’s “exit from its self-incurred immaturity”⁹⁶ by virtue of the deployment of free rational thinking—Bonhoeffer does not equate the idea of coming of age with the enlightenment, but rather with the *rejection* the kind of theology the enlightenment itself bred. The suspicion of religion in modernity’s later stages therefore presents a positive opportunity for the truly transcendent God to be proclaimed, over against the domesticated transcendence of the enlightenment. Humanity’s coming of age enables a re-orientation to the substance of the Christian faith: “[O]ur coming of age leads us to a truer recognition of our situation before God.”⁹⁷ Thus, as Selby puts it, “Bonhoeffer insists *both* on a historical development leading to human autonomy *and*

⁹² *LPP*, 366.

⁹³ *LPP*, 428.

⁹⁴ “God is being increasingly pushed out of a world come of age, from the realm of our knowledge and life and, since Kant, has only occupied the ground beyond the world of experience.” *LPP*, 450. “Kant is basically a deist” *LPP*, 477.

⁹⁵ “[O]ne must simply recognize that the world and humankind have come of age.” *LPP*, 455.

⁹⁶ Immanuel Kant, ‘An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment’, in James Schmidt, *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-century Answers and Twentieth-century Questions* (London: University of California Press, 1996), 58.

⁹⁷ *LPP*, 478.

on a gospel impetus to autonomy, both requiring a situation where the *deus ex machina* is replaced by a God who is truly a suffering participant within the life of the world.”⁹⁸

Religion allied to a *deus ex machina* opposes this coming of age by fatally retreating into the private sphere, the only place where the ‘stopgap God’ can be protected. By trying to “persuade this world that has come of age that it cannot live without ‘God’ as its guardian”,⁹⁹ religion invites its own demise, continually creating for itself a ‘bastion’ of religious relevance—specifically, the inner, personal life. As Clifford Green says, ‘religion’ as Bonhoeffer is outlining it here, “describes a particular way of behaving, feeling and thinking in the effort to cope with human weaknesses and problems” manifested in a “*psychic posture* with three aspects: weakness, dependence, and the power of God.”¹⁰⁰ A zero-sum-game between God’s power and human ability is therefore implied by religion: if God mitigates human weakness, then human strength relegates God to irrelevance. Therefore this retreat of religion into the private or individualistic-existential sphere is ultimately self-defeating. It leads not to religion’s preservation at all, for humanity come of age perceives its retreat as indicative of its progressive irrelevance.

At the heart of this ‘religion’, is the failure to think properly about the transcendence of God. Firstly, a *deus ex machina* does not transcend, but merely serves a particular purpose. Secondly, as there are only certain areas of life where God is meaningful, God cannot relate to the world in its fullness, and consequently the world cannot find its meaning in God. In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer had protested against *Raumdenken* (realm-thinking) and in these letters he finds religiousness unable to think of God and the world together.

Bonhoeffer reaffirms Barth’s stature as a critic of the domestication of transcendence, with his emphasis upon the contingency of divine revelation, but, echoing his critique of what Frei calls Barth’s epistemological monophysitism, accuses Barth of a “positivism of revelation” that “in the end ... sets up a law of faith and tears up what

⁹⁸ Peter Selby, ‘Christianity in a world come of age’, in De Gruchy (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 235.

⁹⁹ *LPP*, 426–427.

¹⁰⁰ Green, *Bonhoeffer*, 262.

is—through Christ’s becoming flesh!—a gift for us.”¹⁰¹ Much has been discussed around quite what Bonhoeffer means by ‘positivism of revelation’ here.¹⁰² Amidst all these discussions, it at least seems clear that he was concerned to emphasise the continuity and ambiguity of the world in a way he felt Barth had not. In Barth, “[t]he church stands in the place of religion—that in itself is biblical—but the world is left to its own devices, as it were, to rely on itself. That is the error.”¹⁰³ Therefore, whilst resisting the temptation to blow Bonhoeffer’s passing comment out of proportion, it seems reasonable to highlight continuity here with his critique of Barth in *Act and Being*, which I argued fits appropriately alongside Frei’s critique of Barth’s epistemological monophysitism. Bonhoeffer is looking for an affirmation of the world by virtue of its relationship to God—something that is impossible for this post-enlightenment ‘religious’ model, but also problematic, he thinks, in Barth’s protest against religion.

The progressively impotent *deus ex machina* is therefore rejected in favour of a radical proclamation of God ‘in the midst’.

I’d like to speak of God not at the boundaries but in the center, not in weakness but in strength, thus not in death and guilt but in human life and human goodness.¹⁰⁴

Contrary to a zero-sum-game between human epistemology and God’s ‘place’ in the world, Bonhoeffer envisages human knowledge and strength as belonging properly ‘in’ God.

God wants to be recognized in the midst of our lives, in life and not only in dying, in health and strength and not only in suffering, in action and not only in sin. The ground for this lies in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. God is the center of life and doesn’t just ‘turn up’ when we have unsolved problems to be solved.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ *LPP*, 373.

¹⁰² See Andreas Pangritz, ‘Bonhoeffer and the Barthian Movement’, in Peter Frick (ed.), *Bonhoeffer’s Intellectual Formation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 277–278; and Tom Greggs, *Theology Against Revelation: Constructive Dialogues with Bonhoeffer and Barth* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 54–64.

¹⁰³ *LPP*, 373.

¹⁰⁴ *LPP*, 366–367.

¹⁰⁵ *LPP*, 406–407.

To borrow from *Ethics*, ‘religious-ness’ fails to participate in the *Christuswirklichkeit*, where human life is affirmed in its penultimacy, its worldliness.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, the question that follows ‘who is Christ for us today’ is “how do we speak ... in a worldly way about God?”¹⁰⁷ Bonhoeffer continues,

How do we go about being ‘religionless-worldly’ Christians, how can we be *εκκλησία*, those who are called out, without understanding ourselves as religiously privileged, but instead seeing ourselves as belonging wholly to the world? Christ would then no longer be the object of religion, but something else entirely, truly lord of the world.¹⁰⁸

Bonhoeffer’s emerging answer to these questions points to God as the transcendent one at the centre of the world in Christ—the one whose presence is not limited to the periphery of human capabilities or to human weakness, but whose transcendence is exhibited precisely in being amongst us. Not as a ‘solution’, but the origin and meaning of life:

God’s ‘beyond’ is not what is beyond our cognition. Epistemological transcendence has nothing to do with God’s transcendence. God is the beyond in the midst of our lives.¹⁰⁹

Speaking of God in a worldly way is therefore not about jettisoning the concept of transcendence *per se*, but instead reclaiming it from the domesticating narrative of modernity. God who is “properly transcendent” overcomes the domesticated *deus ex machina*.¹¹⁰ What Bonhoeffer goes on to call “religionless Christianity”¹¹¹ is Christianity that refuses a domesticated account of God’s transcendence, and instead recognises the wholly otherness of God as God’s being *for* the world as Creator and

¹⁰⁶ See Ziegler’s recognition of the prison letters as expounding the logic of ultimacy and penultimacy in *Ethics*. Bonhoeffer, he says, developed his “theological concept of the secular in terms of the real dialectic between the ultimate and penultimate”. Philip G. Ziegler, ‘Eschatology and Secularity in the Late Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’, in John De Gruchy, Stephen Plant, Christiane Tietz (eds.), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Theology Today: A Way Between Fundamentalism and Secularism* (München: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 2009), 127–128.

¹⁰⁷ *LPP*, 364.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *LPP*, 367.

¹¹⁰ Ziegler, ‘Eschatology’, 133.

¹¹¹ *LPP*, 364.

Redeemer—most fully as Jesus of Nazareth, God Incarnate as a human being. As Ziegler also summarises, then, Bonhoeffer sees that Christianity can “affirm true worldliness because—and not in spite of—‘a real coming from the other side’”.¹¹²

On these matters, we come across what are apparently Frei’s only published comments on Bonhoeffer, where he recognises Bonhoeffer as a theologian of transcendence, but incorrectly allies him with the secularisation movement, and overlooks his Christocentrism. In an essay on German theology (1974) Frei repeats something similar to Bonhoeffer when he says, “only an utterly transcendent God ... can be true to a secular age, a secular world, a secular man”,¹¹³ but apparently fails to see that Bonhoeffer’s Christological reconfiguration of the question of transcendence operates along the same lines as his own theological sensibilities. Frei perceives the link between Bonhoeffer’s critique of Barth’s theology of revelation, and Luther’s emphasis on “the full descent of God into the finite order in Christ”¹¹⁴ (recall again their complementarity as regards epistemological monophysitism). However, Frei seems to believe that Bonhoeffer reacts to Barth primarily along the lines of a liberal secularisation that belongs more within the framework of domesticated transcendence than in the true transcendence of Christ in the midst of the world. Problematically partnering Bonhoeffer with Gogarten, Frei says,

Whereas to the early Barth the attack on religion had meant the affirmation of God’s deity, Bonhoeffer and Gogarten affirmed man in the world without the ‘God hypothesis’, because God enters precisely into that historical, living secular context and not in to a sacralized, metaphysically tinged world ... To speak of God in a secular way, Bonhoeffer’s quest, is to speak of secular man in a secular world, affirmed by God not in his weakness but in his strength and confidence. This was the obverse side of Barth’s early proclamation of divine transcendence; but it is a contrapuntal effect Barth hardly would have sounded.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Ziegler, ‘Eschatology’, 125.

¹¹³ Hans W. Frei, ‘German Theology: Transcendence and Secularity’, in Charles E. McClelland and Steven P. Scher (eds.), *Postwar German Culture* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974), 105.

¹¹⁴ Frei, ‘German Theology’, 105.

¹¹⁵ Frei, ‘German Theology’, 105–106. On Friedrich Gogarten’s view of secularisation, see Larry Shiner, ‘Gogarten and the Tasks of a Theology of Secularization’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (36, 1968), 99–108. See also Frei’s brief description of Gogarten, along with Bultmann, as a theologian for whom “the uniqueness of Jesus Christ lies not in the original ‘mythological’ or at least metaphysical picture of Him, but in our translation of its meaning into the terms of the contemporary,

Though Frei recognises Bonhoeffer's Lutheran perspective on God's 'full descent' into finitude in Christ, he omits Bonhoeffer's (and thereby Luther's) Christocentrism. As we shall see below, it is by virtue of such Christocentrism that the Bonhoeffer's protest against domesticated transcendence is ultimately focussed on the transcendence of God in the crucified and risen Christ—expressed again in terms of a Lutheran *theologia crucis*. As Wüstenberg has pointed out, one who “fails to see Bonhoeffer's Christological center misinterprets him ... especially with regard to the notion of nonreligious interpretation.”¹¹⁶ We cannot hold Frei to account as if he were publishing an entire essay on Bonhoeffer, but we can at the very least recognise the ironic way Frei's paragraph on Bonhoeffer highlights a missed opportunity for recognising the similarities in their theological outlooks.

Frei's comments, though, reflect the shape of much misinterpretation of Bonhoeffer in the 1960s and 1970s. Notoriously, John Robinson's *Honest to God* (1963) popularised an enthusiastic misinterpretation of Bonhoeffer's thought about non-religious language, calling for language about God's transcendence— especially God being 'up' or 'out' there—to be abandoned.¹¹⁷ Robinson presumed that such 'transcendental' language once *did* have a place, but in light of modern humanity's grasp of the world was now meaningless. In a sweeping statement of (probably unintended) Western intellectual prejudice, Robinson suggested that whilst other cultures/people may remain content with the idea of God as transcendent beyond the world, it was impossible for an “intelligent” person to accept that.¹¹⁸ However, where Robinson defended the past legitimacy of the 'old' approach whilst wanting to jettison it for his own time, to Bonhoeffer a 'religious' and 'un-worldly' approach to God was *never* acceptable.

The problem for Bonhoeffer is not the idea of God beyond the world *per se*, but the categorisation of God as a stop-gap. Robinson's misreading of Bonhoeffer is

lignin 'existential' history of free selves.” Hans W. Frei, 'Religion (Natural and Revealed)' in Marvin Halverson and Arthur Cohen, *A Handbook of Christian Theology* (London: Meridian, 1958), 320–321.

¹¹⁶ Wüstenberg, *Theology of Life*, xiv.

¹¹⁷ John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM, 1963), 13, 43.

¹¹⁸ Robinson writes that religious language “is still the language of most of [God's] children ... There is nothing intrinsically wrong with it ... Nevertheless, I am firmly convinced that this whole way of thinking can be the greatest obstacle to an *intelligent* faith” Robinson, *Honest*, 43. Italics mine.

symptomatic of the former's inability to perceive that the problem lies with modernist 'religion' and not with orthodoxy.¹¹⁹ Bonhoeffer's disagreement is with the *limitation* of God to what Williams calls "a tribal speech, understood only by an inner circle",¹²⁰ and Robinson's approach is also fundamentally 'tribal'—it too seeks an expression of God that 'fits' for a particular milieu. In that sense, it is part of the "decline" that it seeks to reverse.¹²¹

Secularist readings of Bonhoeffer therefore "reflect the religious or secular perspectives of the interpreters" and ignore "the Christological core in Bonhoeffer's theology".¹²² To Bonhoeffer's mind, the world's coming of age (which for Robinson implied a growing-out of the concept of God's exteriority) in fact calls people to the mystery of God in Jesus of Nazareth—for and in the world as the crucified and risen one.¹²³ Worldliness and 'non-religious-ness' point towards God in Christ as the beyond (the transcendent) in the midst of the world, rather than towards a collapse of any kind of transcendence into a 'Christology from below'.¹²⁴

What is beyond this world is meant, in the gospel, to be there *for* this world—not in the anthropocentric sense of liberal, mystical, pietistic, ethical theology,

¹¹⁹ "Dr. Robinson does not seem to realize that some of the positions he puts forward as revolutionary discoveries, especially suited to twentieth century man who has 'come of age', are in fact commonplaces of traditional thought." Herbert McCabe, O.P., 'Review of *Honest to God*', in John A. T. Robinson and David L. Edwards, *The Honest to God Debate* (London: SCM, 1963), 166.

¹²⁰ Rowan Williams, Speech at the opening of the International Bonhoeffer Congress, University of Wrocław, Poland, 2006.

<http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2116/dietrich-bonhoeffer-archbishops-speech-to-the-international-bonhoeffer-congress-poland>.

¹²¹ "*Honest to God* is ... part of the very phenomenon whose decline or decadence prompted its writing." Rowan Williams, *Anglican Identities* (London: DLT, 2004), 119.

¹²² Ralph K. Wüstenberg, 'Philosophical Influences on Bonhoeffer's "Religionless Christianity"', in Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmerman (eds.), *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought: Cruciform Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 137–138. "Bonhoeffer ... quickly became a hero of iconoclastic radicals ... It is not biased to claim that these theologians fundamentally misinterpreted and distorted Bonhoeffer when they drafted him in for their own secular agenda." Timothy K. Larsen, 'The Evangelical Reception of Dietrich Bonhoeffer', in Johnson and Larsen, *Bonhoeffer, Christ and Culture*, 40.

¹²³ Colossians 4:3.

¹²⁴ For an example of 'Christology from below', see MacQuarrie: "To call him the God-man ... is to claim that in him human transcendence has reached the point at which the human life has been so closely united with the divine life that, in the traditional language, it has been 'deified'." John MacQuarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (London: SCM, 1990), 370.

but in the biblical sense of the creation and the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.¹²⁵

This is why Bonhoeffer, though he admired Bultmann, could never agree with the latter's 'demythologization' project. To Bultmann, the world of heaven, earth and hell, angels, miracles and in particular resurrection, is "incredible to men and women today because for them the mythical world picture is a thing of the past"¹²⁶ Bultmann wished to extract the New Testament proclamation from its mythological garb, believing that the mythology was merely the cultural and historical décor of the message as it was proclaimed in its time.¹²⁷ Bultmann did not totally de-historicise the New Testament's message, but believed that the historicity lay in the transformative preaching of the message of divine love and freedom which originated out of faith in the resurrection of the crucified Christ,¹²⁸ rather than in the historicity of the events themselves: "the only thing that can be comprehended as a historical event is the Easter faith of the first disciples."¹²⁹

Bultmann therefore offers what Bonhoeffer calls a "liberal reductionism ... reducing Christianity to an 'essence'", epitomising the kind of individualistic, existential, other-worldly religiousness that is no longer of any relevance.¹³⁰ Like Robinson's secularisation, Bultmann's project works to fit the gospel *inside* the intellectual furnishings of modernity, thus embodying that to which Frei too was seeking an alternative.¹³¹ What Bonhoeffer wants to do is describe and communicate the *entirety* of the Christian gospel (not just aspects of it) in a way that is free from the

¹²⁵ *LPP*, 373.

¹²⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology: The Problem of Demythologizing the New Testament Proclamation (1941)', in Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, trans. Schubert M. Ogden (London: SCM, 1985), 3.

¹²⁷ "[T]here is nothing specifically Christian about the mythical world picture, which is simply the world picture of a time now past that was not yet formed by scientific thinking." Bultmann, 'New Testament', 3.

¹²⁸ The "meaning of the Christ event" is "that we can have our authentic life only in submission, and yet cannot realize such submission because of all our efforts we remain our highhanded selves ... our authentic life becomes a possibility in fact for us only when we are freed from ourselves." Bultmann, 'New Testament', 30.

¹²⁹ Bultmann, 'New Testament', 40.

¹³⁰ *LPP*, 430. "You can't separate God from miracles (as Bultmann thinks); instead, you must be able to interpret and proclaim them *both* 'nonreligiously.' Bultmann's approach is still basically liberal (that is, it cuts the gospel short) whereas I'm trying to think theologically." *LPP*, 372.

¹³¹ Like Robinson too, Bultmann implies a sweeping intellectual prejudice: "no mature person represents God as a being who exists above in heaven." Bultmann, 'New Testament', 4.

domesticated ‘religious’ idea of God, and in this he complements Frei’s agenda. ‘Religionless-ness’ does not abstract the meaning of the narratives from the events in them, but recognises the inherently ‘worldly’ character of those narratives of God’s being *pro nobis* in Christ. Bultmann may well have recognised the incongruity between liberal modernity and ‘religion’, but offered a solution still within the confines of the former and therefore did not, says Bonhoeffer, go “far enough”.¹³²

Both Bonhoeffer’s desire here to go ‘beyond’ Bultmann, and the way Frei ‘turns Bultmann’s demythologization on its head’ highlight a similar response to Bultmann’s project, insofar as they believe that the *whole* Christian gospel has to be extracted from the nineteenth century dichotomy of faith and history, and read in the context of faith in God’s activity towards the world. Bonhoeffer recognises that the particular narrative of God in Christ cannot be dispensed with, and that speaking of God’s relation to the whole world means speaking of the incarnate, crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth, in a freshly non-religious way. Describing in his own way something like Frei’s insistence upon the union of narrative and meaning, Bonhoeffer summarises:

[T]he full content, including the ‘mythological’ concepts, must remain—the New Testament is not a mythological dressing up of a universal truth, but this mythology (resurrection and so forth) is the thing itself!¹³³

However, if Bonhoeffer is not a liberal secularist (*pace* Frei’s assessment) neither, again like Frei, is he engaged in a pure project of recovery, for he understands himself as thinking *forwards*. Whilst he builds on a critique of post-enlightenment epistemology, and fashions an alternative characterised by Lutheran orthodoxy, he does not simply imply that what is needed is a recovery of a medieval theology. Quite to the contrary, he chastises those who “condemn the entire development that has brought them to this impasse”,¹³⁴ especially those who favour,

¹³² *LPP*, 372.

¹³³ *LPP*, 430. Clifford Green suggests that Bonhoeffer’s approach to myth here might be fruitfully explored in relation to the hermeneutical questions thrown up by Ricoeur. Clifford Green, ‘Bonhoeffer’s Quest for Authentic Christianity’, in De Gruchy et al, *Bonhoeffer’s Theology Today*, 339. I would suggest that using Frei as an accompaniment to Bonhoeffer is a good place to start that line of research, given that Frei complements Bonhoeffer on these matters whilst articulating his view explicitly within the hermeneutical field.

¹³⁴ *LPP*, 478.

the *salto mortale* back to the Middle Ages ... The return to that is only a counsel of despair, a sacrifice made only at the cost of intellectual integrity. It's a dream to the tune of 'Oh, if only I knew the road back, the long road to childhood's land'.¹³⁵

This nostalgic attempt to go back 'behind' reality fails to really live in the world. Bonhoeffer genuinely believes in the need for something 'new' to counter religiousness, but this *new* thing is forged out of worship and obedience to the God and Father of Jesus Christ—who is eternally new.¹³⁶ The newness and freshness is not about reimagining a different gospel, but asking how, given the theological perversities of modernity, true obedience to the crucified and risen Christ can be lived authentically in that situation. Of course Bonhoeffer recognises such authenticity in figures of Christian history, but knows that an imitation of such authenticity is about participation fully in his today, just as those figures participated in theirs. He asks what commitment to the same gospel looks like in his particular milieu.

'Religionless-ness' is not, then, a call to relativisation—but neither is it a pure project of recovery. It is about living today before the God of the gospel; before, in and with the crucified and risen one. Whilst a wholly religionless world has, as Greggs says, failed to materialise,¹³⁷ Bonhoeffer's call to recognise the paradoxical transcendence of God in Jesus of Nazareth is no less potent today. The theological substance that accompanies the sociological prediction is what matters, and this substance reaches its peak in a recovery of the explicit *theologia crucis* of the Christology lectures.

ii) *Jesus Christ, the transcendent crucified one for others*

As we might expect, then, coming of age leads not to a comfortable recognition of God in all parts of life—a cultural Christianity which sustains itself with an account of what Bonhoeffer in *Discipleship* called "cheap grace"¹³⁸—but to the scandal of God's transcendent activity in the crucified one *pro nobis*. Religion's failure to satisfactorily

¹³⁵ *LPP*, 478. '*salto mortale*' is generally understood to mean 'death defying leap'. *LPP*, 478, n.32.

¹³⁶ Revelation 21:5.

¹³⁷ Tom Greggs, 'Religionless Christianity in a complexly religious and secular world', in Stephen Plant and Ralf K. Wüstenberg (eds.), *Religion, Religionless and Contemporary Western Culture* (Frankfurt: Peter Laing, 2008), 114.

¹³⁸ *D*, 43.

account for either God's transcendence or the world's relationship to God must give way to a *theologia crucis* that emphasises the paradoxical transcendence of Jesus in the world as the crucified one, by virtue of which God is for the world. Coming of age leads us to the cross, and as Bonhoeffer pointed out in *Discipleship*, the 'hiddenness' of the cross does not translate into an invisible, compromised church, but to a visible church community that bears the cross of Jesus.¹³⁹

For Bonhoeffer, then, Jesus Christ is the transcendent Saviour in his scandalous particularity. This is clearly seen in one of his most startling passages:

God would have us know that we must live as those who manage their lives without God. The same God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15:34). The same God who makes us to live in the world without the working hypothesis of god is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God, and with God, we live without God. God consents to be pushed out of the world onto the cross; God is weak and powerless in the world and in precisely this way, and only so, is at our side and helps us ... Human religiosity directs people in need to the power of God in the world, God as *deus ex machina*. The Bible directs people towards the powerlessness and the suffering of God; only the suffering God can help. To this extent, one may say that the previously described development towards the world's coming of age, which has cleared the way by eliminating a false notion of God, frees us to see the God of the Bible, who gains ground and power in the world by being powerless.¹⁴⁰

Humanity's 'coming of age' and the parallel death of the *deus ex machina* reveal that God's saving presence in the world is actually another death—another pushing out of God—not this time of a false working hypothesis but the execution of the God-human Jesus of Nazareth. In true Lutheran fashion, in that which is wholly not-God—i.e. death and sin—we find God for us. The death of Christ is not merely absence from the world, but paradoxically is also the saving presence of God in the suffering and rejected one. Unlike the domesticated *deus ex machina*, God in Christ "is not reduced to absenteeism, but helps us by virtue of his weakness."¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ "It is an evil sophistry which uses the cross of Jesus to derive from it the church's call to conformation to the world ... Is the cross conformation to the world?" *D*, 114.

¹⁴⁰ *LPP*, 479–480.

¹⁴¹ Stephen Plant, *Bonhoeffer* (London: Continuum, 2004), 136.

Rachel Muers' commentary on Bonhoeffer's image of God 'pushed out of the world onto the cross' highlights that mentioned in the previous chapter: the way in which the hiddenness that characterises the *theologia crucis* constitutes Jesus' transcendence—his ungraspability. Bonhoeffer's image, she says,

[o]n the one hand, points to the crucifixion as the culmination of the self-humiliation of Christ, the point of greatest weakness and complete hiddenness. On the other hand, it indicates another aspect of the *incognito*—the irreducibility of Christ to what is knowable, and hence to his transcendence of attempts to define or judge him, a radical freedom over against the world.¹⁴²

In Frei's terms, 'that which Jesus undergoes' is that which both makes for his universal soteriological significance *and* also makes for his ungraspability—or what Muers summarises effectively as a perpetual "calling into question the final validity of any particular reading, or personal or communal 'manifestation' of the history of Christ."¹⁴³

The connection between God being 'pushed out' and humanity being 'set free to live without God' does not imply a convenient quasi-mature atheism, but rather implies life *without* a God who solves all our problems or who is co-opted into our political agendas, and instead, and in its place life *with* the crucified and risen one. True Christian freedom is therefore freedom to suffer alongside the suffering Christ—to participate in God-in-Christ's vicarious representative action for the other.¹⁴⁴ This kind of participation in the form of Christ is overtly concrete and 'worldly'. Here, as Harvey says, Bonhoeffer's "use of participation language takes on a new intensity".¹⁴⁵ Bonhoeffer says,

The human being is called upon to share in God's suffering at the hands of a godless world. Thus we must really live in that godless world ... Our lives must be 'worldly', so that we can share precisely so in God's sufferings.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² Rachel Muers, *Keeping God's Silence: Towards a Theological Ethics of Communication* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 77.

¹⁴³ Muers, *Keeping*, 85.

¹⁴⁴ See *Sanctorum Communio* and *Ethics*.

¹⁴⁵ Harvey, *Taking*, 53.

¹⁴⁶ *LPP*, 480.

Bonhoeffer distinguishes suffering with Christ from human suffering *per se*. There is no direct equivocation of Christ with all human beings, for participation, we recall, “names the intimate yet asymmetrical relationship of faith that exists between ourselves as participants in God’s messianic suffering, and Christ as the one in whom we participate, in whom the triune God unties the divine reality with the reality of the world.”¹⁴⁷ The emphasis is upon turning towards the other in their suffering, which may lead to our own suffering (or, in terms of *Ethics*, our own guilt). Turning from inward-looking-ness towards participation in Christ’s being for the other is true repentance (*μετάνοια*)—true participation in the new humanity of which Christ is the head.¹⁴⁸ Christ therefore remains transcendent, beyond us as the one who defines our humanity and yet who can never be relativised into our own identity and activity. As Mayer says, “[t]he experience of transcendence is to be sought not simply in being-for-others but in *Jesus*’ being-for-others.”¹⁴⁹ Indeed, in notes which draw together the salient aspects of our entire treatment of Bonhoeffer, he uses the language of transcendence to describe cruciform Christian living:

Our relationship to God is no ‘religious’ relationship to some highest, most powerful, and best being imaginable—that is no genuine transcendence. Our relationship to God is a new life in ‘being there for others’, through participation in the being of Jesus. The transcendent is not the infinite, unattainable tasks, but the neighbour within reach in any given situation. God in human form! Not as in the oriental religions in animal forms as the monstrous, the chaotic, the remote, the terrifying, but also not in the conceptual forms of the absolute, the metaphysical, the infinite, and so one, either, nor again the Greek god ... But rather ‘the human being for others’! therefore the Crucified One. The human being living out of the transcendent.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Harvey, *Taking*, 54.

¹⁴⁸ *LPP*, 480; See also McBride: “The church offers a non-triumphal witness in a pluralistic society not by viewing itself as religiously or morally favored but by taking the form of the crucified Christ, who belonged wholly to this world through a divine righteousness expressed through repentance.” McBride, *The Church*, 87. The only weakness in this statement, I think, is that the past tense ‘belonged’ has the tendency to isolate Christ’s belonging to the world in the past.

¹⁴⁹ Rainer Mayer, ‘Christology: The Genuine Form of Transcendence’, in A. J. Klassen, *A Bonhoeffer Legacy: Essays in Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 188–189.

¹⁵⁰ *LPP*, 501. Whilst he describes this as ‘not in ... the metaphysical’ it is perhaps more accurate to describe this as a rejection of speculative, ‘other-worldly’ metaphysics rather than metaphysics *per se* (see Harvey, *Taking*, 137). Indeed, an approach to transcendence grounded in the crucified Christ implies a rigorous Christological metaphysic as found in the concept *Christuswirklichkeit*. Of course, in rejecting the *deus ex machina*, Bonhoeffer rejects any speculative abstraction from human life in the world, but

Jesus' 'transcendent being for others' is his being the incarnate one who is the crucified one. In Ziegler's words, transcendence is "concretely identified" by God's suffering in Christ.¹⁵¹ As God pushed out of the world—crucified outside the city walls—Jesus is wholly for others, the one in whom all humanity's sin is taken on and rejected by God.¹⁵² Christian discipleship, "rooted in the *theologia crucis* of the Lutheran tradition that Bonhoeffer had begun to make his own over a decade earlier",¹⁵³ is marked by participation in the paradoxically transcendent being of God incarnate, the one beyond the world who is nevertheless in the world; the one who is hidden in the humiliation of sinful flesh, in the utter rejection of crucifixion. Christians participate in the one beyond them; their life is found in the one who is supremely other—transcendent and particular.

Participation in the transcendent Christ then makes for true relationship to transcendence in every day 'worldly' life—i.e. in relationship with the neighbour—both because the exteriority of the other person is not master-able and cannot be resolved into my own existence; and most fundamentally because God-in-Christ, the ultimate other, is found (though not exclusively) in and through life for others.¹⁵⁴ Anderson speaks of Bonhoeffer's recognition of "the normative character of basic ontic relationships",¹⁵⁵ by which he means that God 'places' human beings into truth through relationships in which they are for others. Therefore, "man is up against God himself when Christ meets him at the centre of an ontic relationship".¹⁵⁶ Anderson, like Tietz and others, recognises that God must remain other in all of this, because human relationships do not constitute something of the divine by their own volition. God "is not a reality added to the social relation, but the reality of God constitutes

conceived Christologically, the metaphysics of transcendence *is* concrete and immediate, whilst being grounded in the transcendence the crucified Christ—the human being for others.

¹⁵¹ Ziegler, 'Eschatology', 133.

¹⁵² Hebrew 13:12. In Barth's words: "That the elected man Jesus had to suffer and die means no more and no less than that in becoming man God makes Himself responsible for man who became His enemy, and that He takes upon Himself all the consequences of man's action—his rejection and his death." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II.2: The Doctrine of God* (London, T & T Clark, 2004), 124.

¹⁵³ Green, *Bonhoeffer*, 273.

¹⁵⁴ Matthew 25:40.

¹⁵⁵ Anderson, *Historical*, 79.

¹⁵⁶ Anderson, *Historical*, 85.

that relation.”¹⁵⁷ Again, the reality of God towards the world in the crucified Christ constitutes the transcendent character of human life for the other—only because of God’s activity is weakness and suffering for the other the form of Christ.¹⁵⁸ Thus on account of God’s transcendent act, Christianity is understood in ‘worldly’ terms, because Christians are redeemed *for*, not away from, life in the world.

This connection between God’s transcendent act and the world-oriented character of redemption is emphasised by Bonhoeffer’s reading of the resurrection—which here is linked to worldliness in a clearer fashion than in the 1933 lectures. “The Christian hope of resurrection”, he says, “refers people to their life on earth in a wholly new way, more sharply than the OT.”¹⁵⁹ We must understand this in the light of Bonhoeffer’s positive emphasis, in many of his letters, upon the importance of “reading the [Old Testament] in the light of the new”.¹⁶⁰ According to Harvey, the way Bonhoeffer practices this throughout the letters is a sustained (yet not theoretically explicated) example of a more mature kind of figural reading than found previously, wherein he locates Israel at the centre of Christian theology, in contrast to the rampant Nazi supercessionism against which he protested in the church struggle of the 1930’s.¹⁶¹ Bonhoeffer says in that Old Testament readers find “redemption

¹⁵⁷ Anderson, *Historical*, 77. See also Christiane Tietz, ‘Bonhoeffer on the Ontological Structure of the Church’, in Adam C. Clark and Michael Mawson (eds.), *Ontology and Ethics: Bonhoeffer and Contemporary Scholarship* (Oregon: Pickwick, 2013), esp. 44. Tietz writes specifically about *Act and Being* but her observations pertain to *Letters and Papers from Prison* too. Compare this to the misleading implications of Geoffrey Kelly’s comments on transcendence and Christology: “the mode of transcendence and freedom manifested through Christ became a model for the ultimate transcendence and freedom to which every person is drawn by God.” Geoffrey B. Kelly, *Liberating Faith: Bonhoeffer’s Message for Today* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 51. *Pace* Kelly, Christ is not the ‘model’ for transcendence, but *is* the transcendent one who constitutes the meaning of human relationships to one another by the work of the Spirit.

¹⁵⁸ “There is no ‘power in weakness’ which, by itself, transcends the world and offers an ontological vision of Christ. Nor can one simply make the way of humility an ontic form of existence and thereby reach the transcendence of God.” Anderson, *Historical*, 184. As mentioned in chapter 5, Anderson ultimately concludes that Bonhoeffer does not manage this distinction well enough, in the end making co-humanity a “pole of transcendence.” In Bonhoeffer’s later work, says Anderson, he simply “moves” this pole from the church (in *Sanctorum Communio*) “out into the world”. Anderson, *Historical*, 218. On the basis of the scholarship presented here, especially in relation to resurrection (see above and below) I suggest Anderson’s charge can ultimately be negated.

¹⁵⁹ *LPP*, 448.

¹⁶⁰ *LPP*, 367.

¹⁶¹ Harvey, *Taking*, 218–223. If indeed we are to take on Harvey’s categorisation of this aspect of Bonhoeffer’s work as ‘figural’, then this is certainly a more nuanced example than the reading of David (see above). Even so, here Frei’s insistence on the *historicity* of the type still serves to critically elucidate

within history, that is, *this side* of the bounds of death. Israel is redeemed out of Egypt so that it may live before God, as God's people on earth."¹⁶² Bonhoeffer's radical concentration on the Old Testament is therefore an affirmation of a Christianity that 'refers' people to the world. Yet, by virtue of the resurrection, the one in whom God exists wholly for others even unto death is himself present in this the world in a wholly new way—i.e. in *his* resurrection body. In participating in the being of the risen Jesus Christ, human beings are participating too in the new humanity, and are called to be 'new' in the world. "Christians do not have the ultimate escape route out of their earthly tasks and difficulties into eternity ... Christ takes hold of human beings in the midst of their lives."¹⁶³ Worldliness is ultimately about union with the crucified and risen Christ who is in the world as one pushed out of it.

As in 1933, here Bonhoeffer emphasises that the worldliness of resurrection does not neutralise its profound ambiguity. To recall the lectures, and Frei's point about the unsubstitutability of Jesus continuing through the resurrection narratives, the risen one remains the crucified one; the resurrection does not discard the paradoxical *theologia crucis*. Because Jesus' resurrection is not about his salvation to another realm (recall again Bonhoeffer's opposition to *Raumdenken* in *Ethics*) Easter faith proclaims that the crucified one is now alive in the crucified and risen body—the body in which he was tortured and humiliated—present yet hidden in his identity as God for us. In the resurrection the hiddenness and 'slipperiness' remain; the paradoxical *theologia crucis* is not neutralised. Instead, as remarked previously, the resurrection appearances are characterised by the transcendence of Christ who returns powerfully to the community of disciples and yet is never graspable by them. The reference back to life on earth does not simply affirm a *status quo*, as if the resurrection were a turn to immanence over and against transcendence, or an affirmation of worldliness over and against beyondness. Instead, Christ is present (immanent) precisely as the transcendent and hidden one.

Bonhoeffer's practice, and thus serves as a meaningful theoretical basis on which to read Bonhoeffer both critically and affirmatively.

¹⁶² *LPP*, 447.

¹⁶³ *LPP*, 448.

Therefore, to interpret Bonhoeffer through Williams again, we cannot treat the resurrection as a ‘giving back’—as if Christ taken in crucifixion is now given into our hands in resurrection.¹⁶⁴ The resurrection is, of course, good news—for through the crucified and risen Christ, God is opening the way to eternal life for the old humanity.¹⁶⁵ However, precisely *as* that good news, it is not a perpetual reassurance for human beings as they are. The risen Christ does not function as a working hypothesis (a *deus ex machina*) to mitigate fear of death. Instead, the risen one transcends as God incarnate, who was hidden in the humiliation of crucifixion, and who now operates beyond the boundaries of ‘normal’ living, yet in the midst of life. Participation in the life of the risen one is the same as participation in the life of the crucified one—living for others in the midst of the world; living in relationship with and to Jesus Christ who ultimately slips through our fingers, and through our locked doors, as the transcendent one.

As I have emphasised throughout, this paradoxical transcendence must be expounded according to what Frei calls ‘realistic narrative’, for a de-particularisation of the cross and resurrection moves towards the kind of abstraction that Bonhoeffer wants to avoid. This means that when we speak of God in Christ pushed out of the world onto the cross, we speak of that which must also be *narrated*, not just described in principle—because the fullest expression of the crucifixion involves Roman and Jewish figures of authority, the manipulation of public opinion, a mother witnessing her child’s torture, distressed friends, and other particularities surrounding the event. Of course, these things are not categorically unique to Jesus’ own crucifixion *per se*, but their tragic commonality does not necessitate their generalisation; and in any case what is utterly unique is that this is God, and God’s revelation of Godself in the humiliation of sinful flesh does not happen in abstraction from these particular things which characterise the world at its worst. Furthermore, the resurrection of Christ cannot be expressed or ‘understood’ without the particular joyous puzzlement of Jesus’ friends and the mysterious but concrete particularity of someone appearing

¹⁶⁴ Williams insists upon the importance of the strangeness of the risen Christ for recognising that Jesus’ victimhood cannot be wholly assimilated into our own, and thereby turned into an ideological trump card on account of Christ my “fellow sufferer”. By virtue of the continuation of his unsubstitutable identity, the cross remains “his, not ours”, and thus it remains the cross of the one who is other, unrecognisable and strange. Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: DLT, 2002), 71–75.

¹⁶⁵ 1 Corinthians 15.49.

beyond a locked door. Abstracting these particularities empties the paradox of some of its content, diluting the absoluteness of God's being among us in Christ, which is why allowing Frei to complement and guide our reading of Bonhoeffer is helpful.

However, when parsed according to Frei's emphases upon particularity, *Letters and Papers* again demonstrate how Bonhoeffer's can offer a fuller account of the paradoxical transcendence of Jesus' particularity than Frei's work is able to offer on its own, on account of his particular approach to a *theologia crucis* and to the ambiguity of the resurrection. In short, Bonhoeffer holds off any kind of resolution to accounts of Jesus' identity, ensuring that the difficult, slippery aspects of the gospel are not neutralised, but present themselves starkly.

iii) *Summary*

Bonhoeffer contrasts the 'who' of Jesus Christ—*pro nobis* as one pushed out of the world—with a domesticated *deus ex machina* of post-enlightenment theological rationalism. Explicating 'transcendence' as God's being for humanity in the crucified and risen Christ, the human being for others, he points to what Anderson calls the "logic" of historical transcendence—that is, "instead of God's absolute difference being diminished in any way by his interaction with the world, it is made more real and explicit, because this 'worldly' act is God's transcendence".¹⁶⁶

The full implication of the 'worldliness' of this transcendence is explicit when we allow Frei to illuminate what is implicit in Bonhoeffer's Christology—that the only way Christians have to talk about God's act in Christ is wedded to historical particularity and unstitutability. 'Being for others in the midst of the world' is not a thematic principle, but a concrete ontological precedent in one person's action insofar as he was/is God incarnate. The truly worldly aspect of Christianity has its meaning only in the transcendent—that it is *God* who acts towards the world in Jesus of Nazareth; and the truly transcendent aspect has its meaning only in the worldly—that God towards the world is this particular man. When we allow Frei to emphasise the concrete unstitutability of Jesus Christ, Bonhoeffer's theology can be read as plumbing the

¹⁶⁶ Anderson, *Historical*, 70.

paradoxical depths of that unsubstitutability which is the very substance of Jesus Christ's transcendence—i.e. his existence as stumbling block. In this sense, the transcendence of Jesus is not only recognised as 'worldly', but also as something fundamentally challenging for us. Humanity come of age is redefined by God who is the beyond in the midst—beyond both as the Creator and Redeemer, and as the problematic stumbling block, God hidden in the humiliation of sinful flesh.

This potential addition to Bonhoeffer's theology goes unnoticed by Frei himself, whose summary of Bonhoeffer stays within a prevailing categorisation of him as a 'secular' theologian. Yet contrary to Frei's reading of Bonhoeffer's theology as constituting an extreme flip-side to Barth's theology of contingent revelation (which elsewhere Frei refers to as 'epistemological monophysitism') Bonhoeffer's theology in fact complements Frei's own response to Barth, shedding light on the middle ground between domesticated transcendence on one hand, and an unworldly theology of revelation on the other. If, as Sonderegger suggested, Frei manifests a 'chastened' orthodox monophysitism¹⁶⁷—emphasising that Jesus' historicity is always that of the transcendent God—then Bonhoeffer too can be seen to articulate such a position, and offer substantial content to Frei as regards the profound paradoxes of the unsubstitutable Christ. Bonhoeffer's theology explicates normativity of Christ for the church in a deeply challenging way.

III

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined how the transcendence of Jesus Christ—at the heart of which lies the paradox of a *theologia crucis*—resides at the centre of both Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*, again in a way that supplements and benefits from Frei's work. Resisting domesticated transcendence, Bonhoeffer gives us both a cosmic and political Christology grounded in the 'who' of the crucified and risen one who cannot be reduced to human principles, limited to solving human problems, or deposited beyond the 'worldly'. Christ in *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers* is the

¹⁶⁷ Katherine Sonderegger, 'Epistemological Monophysitism in Karl Barth and Hans Frei', *Pro Ecclesia* (22, 2013), 260.

transcendent one *pro nobis* as the one wholly in the world, for the world. Contrary to Barker's summary that Bonhoeffer dispenses with God's wholly other-ness so as to emphasise God's presence in the world,¹⁶⁸ Bonhoeffer envisions a fully historical transcendence wherein God who is wholly other 'transcends' in and for the world.

This account of Jesus' transcendence opposes what Bonhoeffer in *Ethics* calls radicalism and compromise, both of which erect domesticating boundaries around Jesus Christ. As Greggs says, whilst fundamentalism—undoubtedly a form of what Bonhoeffer called radicalism—may hold an “innate concern” to “place God at the centre” in opposition to perceived secularisation, it actually recourses to a *deus ex machina*, requiring “the sense of an ever shrinking space for God in society in order to establish its own apocalyptic vision, and to gain support for those who also wish to place God back at the centre.”¹⁶⁹ Fundamentalism thrives on opposition to humanity's coming of age, meaning it belongs squarely within Bonhoeffer's 'religious' bracket and is therefore, as Williams observes, “a quintessentially modern thing”.¹⁷⁰ Furthermore, fundamentalism opposes the Christ who breaks down boundaries, and who calls into question the ability of the religious community to ever fully grasp the one in whose name they speak. On the other hand, compromise—manifest in what H. Richard Niebuhr calls “Culture-Protestantism”¹⁷¹—limits Christ according to the boundaries of human rationality, reducing him to a figure of a broader theme—like justice, peace, tolerance or fairness. This is the Christ of a *deus ex machina*, whose function is to prop up or aid a pervasive socio-political status quo and affirm humans in their rational capabilities.

In contrast to the closed-ness of fundamentalism, or the wide-openness of Culture Protestantism, reading *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers* alongside Frei has shown how witness to the concrete and particular Christ is witness to the transcendent Christ, and that neither emphasis upon the historical particularity of Jesus of Nazareth (such as fundamentalism might misuse to insist upon an inflexibility) nor upon the 'unknowing' aspect of Christian faith (such as Culture Protestantism might appeal to, to prop up a

¹⁶⁸ Barker, *The Cross*, 432–433; and H. Gaylon Barker, 'Without God, We Live With God: Listening to Bonhoeffer's Witness in Today's Public Square', in De Gruchy et al., *Bonhoeffer's Theology Today*, 165.

¹⁶⁹ Greggs, 'Religionless Christianity', 118–119.

¹⁷⁰ Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 124.

¹⁷¹ Niebuhr, *Christ*, 84.

relativisation of Jesus' identity) can be abstracted from each other. Rather, the Christology at the heart of both Frei and Bonhoeffer's theologies—that holds unsubstitutability and transcendence together and that becomes stronger as they are read together—crucially grounds their own theological flexibility, or to turn Frei's phrase around, their *orthodox generosity*.

We now move to take stock of this reading of Frei and Bonhoeffer, to fill out more fully the suggestion that their theology of the transcendence of Jesus grounds their usefulness in the pursuit of a theological 'middle way', and also to recognise that whilst much has been gained by reading the two together, the role of the Holy Spirit has so far been under-articulated. In the following conclusion, as well as drawing together the ideas laid out above, I will suggest that a more robust pneumatology, such as hinted at in chapters 3 and 4, would serve to further ground these ideas. In particular, thinking about the work of the Spirit helps conceptually ground Jesus' own particularity without turning to exclusivity; and also helps us to explicate the nexus between the unsubstitutable Christ and the community to which his identity is generously given by God.

Chapter 8.

CONCLUSION

This conclusion begins by summarising the conversation between Frei and Bonhoeffer on the matters explored above, drawing together three key similarities before turning to four summaries of how each theologian's work can constitute a critical addition to the other. I then suggest that whilst both theologians make room for the work of the Holy Spirit, a more explicit pneumatology can strengthen an account of the transcendence of Jesus derived from them both, especially concerning the relationship between the 'scandal of particularity' and the generosity of the triune God. Finally, I summarise the elements of a theology of Jesus' transcendence derived from Bonhoeffer and Frei with a figural reading of John 19:19–23, and offer brief suggestion regarding the function of the project for ongoing theological reflection.

I

Summarising the Conversation

i) Key similarities

a) Undomesticated transcendence and the integrity of history

The overlap of Bonhoeffer and Frei's concerns was traced by beginning with their objection to the impact of the epistemological constraints placed upon theology by modernity, and their determination to maintain the integrity of the historical in relation to God's transcendent activity. In Placher's terms, they both express *dissatisfaction with a domesticated transcendence* that allies them with Barth; and in Frei's terms, they *reject an epistemological monophysitism* that they recognise in Barth's early work.

Frei's doctoral dissertation shows his appreciation of the way Barth responded to domesticated transcendence, re-positioning theology as faith seeking understanding, and expounding God's utterly gratuitous, saving act towards the world in the crucified

and risen Christ, over against the natural religion of Culture Protestantism. Nevertheless, Frei was worried that Barth downplayed creaturely, continuous historical being (especially in Christology) in the interest of emphasising the utter contingency and freedom of God's act. This concern for a greater recognition of the integrity of the historical in relation to God—a concern that reflected that of his teacher, H. Richard Niebuhr—then becomes the context in which his implicit critique of the domestication of transcendence develops.

Frei more specifically casts aspersions on modernity's domesticating tendencies by tracing the loss of coherence between narrative and meaning in hermeneutics from the seventeenth century onwards, a loss that derives from the perceived impasse of faith and history. Where a problem of faith and history becomes the ultimate framework in which religious concerns must be articulated, the 'truth' of history-like narratives in the scriptures is separated from the narratives themselves. The question becomes something like 'how can these texts fit in the understanding of truth which universal reason gives us?' and the theological implication of that is 'how is God's activity coherent with what we know of universal rationality of the universe?' Behind the divorce of narrative and meaning—especially in what Niebuhr calls 'Culture Protestantism'—lies the domestication of transcendence, and both Frei's critique of the 'eclipse' of narrative reading and his constructive outline of a narrative reading of the gospels are constructed against that backdrop. Frei's insistence upon the unsubstitutable history-likeness of Jesus therefore arises consistently out of this implicit critique. His Christology emphasises that the freely transcendent God acts towards and in the world in the historically particular Jesus Christ, in whom the world finds its true *telos*. As Frei develops his later cultural linguistic analyses, particularly regarding the *sensus literalis* of the scriptures and the kind of theology 'hospitable' to it, modernist assumptions that domesticate God are once more in Frei's sightline. There he critiques the expectation that theology should perform apologetic moves to demonstrate its correlation with, or submission to, generalised theories. His cultural-linguistic exploration also prioritises the historical and contingent—for it is amongst the actual praxis of communities that the act of God towards and in history is articulated and responded to.

Bonhoeffer, too, follows Barth's critique of humanity's attempt to place itself into truth or into relationship with God in Christ, and the concomitant insistence upon the transcendent act of God in Christ—known by faith that seeks understanding—as the foundation of human being and knowing. Yet like Frei, Bonhoeffer is dissatisfied with the way Barth apparently disenfranchises historical existence in relation to God's activity, and therefore he insists upon *person* (i.e. Christ) as a model of divine revelation. As Bonhoeffer's theology develops he becomes a theologian of 'worldliness'—particularly in *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers*—never emptying the transcendence of God into the world, but recognising how God's transcendent activity affirms the world in its historicity, or what one might call 'secularity'.

Frei and Bonhoeffer therefore overlap in starting point. This brings both into nuanced engagement with the Christology of Culture Protestantism (which can broadly be said to trade in a domesticated Jesus) and leads them both to demonstrate that a recovery of transcendence does not entail an other-worldliness, but affirms the world as that reconciled to God in Christ.

b) Christology as 'who?'

Both theologians respond constructively to the domestication of transcendence by *prioritising the personal identity of Jesus Christ*. In their closest terminological overlap, both maintain that Christology is about the '*who*' of Christ.

From Frei's perspective this means one must ask about the identity of Jesus as narratively attested in the gospels, before one can explore how Christian belief about Jesus' presence can make sense (especially within a post-enlightenment concept of faith and history). Frei highlights how, when the gospels are not subjected to a reductive historical consciousness, they yield a description of Jesus who belongs in the realm of unsubstitutable historicity rather than being a mythical figure who points to a general truth behind the narratives about himself. In particular, crucifixion and resurrection are not narrative themes that point to Jesus' 'meaning', but are things he underwent that point to his own unsubstitutable identity as the crucified and risen one, whose identity implies his contemporaneous presence. In a coherence of transcendence and historical particularity, the gospels narrate the unsubstitutable

Jesus in such a way that history-like-ness itself—especially in terms of the resurrection—bends to his identity. For Frei, the narratively rendered meaning of the gospels is *who* Jesus is; and in his later work, that irreducible ‘*who*’ is the normative constraint upon the *sensus literalis* of the scriptures. Frei therefore understands categories or schemes for theological analysis to operate only formally, and, in his later work especially, resists reification of concepts like ‘narrative’ or ‘literal’, so that such descriptive terms witness to rather than contain the unique identity of Jesus. The kind of enquiry that Frei undertakes belongs squarely within the ecclesial realm—the faith seeking understanding of the community.

Bonhoeffer introduces his focus on the ‘who’ question in his Christology lectures, explicating, as DeJonge recognises, the emphasis of *Act and Being* upon a ‘person concept of revelation’.¹ Just as Frei prioritised the question of identity over the question of Jesus’ presence, so for Bonhoeffer the ‘who’ question cannot be relegated to the question of ‘how’ Jesus might be the union of God and humanity. Jesus Christ is the counter-Logos to the human logos, who as the crucified and risen one is out of the grasp of human epistemology and defines humankind according to God’s revelation (like Frei, Bonhoeffer’s approach to the resurrection in particular highlights an ungraspability about Jesus’ historicity). Asking ‘who’ therefore emphasises that the person of Christ cannot be resolved into my own being or understanding, and therefore highlights Christologically what Bonhoeffer had insisted upon since *Sanctorum Communio*—that human beings are constituted from beyond themselves, by God who meets us in the person of Christ, encountered in the church, the sacraments and the community. This emphasis upon the ‘who’ question exerts its influence in Bonhoeffer’s subsequent works—especially in the Christological ontology of *Ethics* and his response to the ‘religious’ domestication of God that he believed characterised his own day (in *Letter’s and Papers From Prison*). Like Frei, Bonhoeffer insists upon the necessarily ecclesial/confessional context for Christological enquiry—he sees Christology as a response to God’s act in Christ, not a preliminary to it. Again, Christological categories operate formally, pointing to the one who cannot be ‘contained’ by them.

¹ Michael P. DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer’s Theological Formation: Berlin, Barth and Protestant Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), 85.

For both theologians, Christology is about the transcendent ‘who’—Jesus Christ who cannot be reduced to generalisations or effects, or objectively deconstructed for analysis. Furthermore, this ‘who’ is irreducibly *historical*—the incarnate, crucified and risen one in whom God reconciles the world to Godself from within the world-historical itself, and whose own particular historicity constitutes his identity.

c) *Cultural linguistics and Jesus pro me*

Bringing together Frei’s cultural linguistic focus and Bonhoeffer’s explication of Jesus as *pro me* and Christ existing as community, illuminates how, for both theologians, *the transcendent ‘who’ of God in Christ is always understood as oriented towards, not away from, Christian communities.*

Frei’s later essays in particular emphasise that the priority of the unsubstitutable identity of Jesus for reading the scriptures should be understood not as a general theory in isolation from, or prior to, the communities of faith that read the texts in this way. Particularly when supplemented with focus on the testimony of the original apostolic community (chapter 4 drew on Bauckham for this) Frei’s work highlights that the normativity of Jesus’s identity cannot merely be accounted for by appealing to an internally originating community consensus. Rather, the extrinsic aspect of relation to God in Christ must be emphasised, as the community recognises the hermeneutical normativity of the identity of Jesus according to faith in the activity of God that coheres with the apparent literal sense of scripture. The cultural-linguistically described *sensus literalis* is therefore grounded in the transcendence of the unsubstitutable Jesus who is towards the church, defining it from beyond itself. Furthermore, Frei understands that both Word and sacrament constitute the indirect (i.e. non-physical) presence, or “self-communication” of God in Christ to the community only because of the promise and self-witness of God, and not by virtue of their own intrinsic power.² Frei shows that focus upon the praxis of the community points towards, not away from, the particular Christ whose presence to the community is the presence of God—the one in whom the community sees the Father.³

² Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 194.

³ John 14:9.

Bonhoeffer followed Luther, insisting that Jesus Christ is known only as one who is *pro me/nobis*. This does not collapse into what Tanner calls “a subjectivist epistemological swerve” wherein Christ’s *pro me* is “identified with God as a matter of human apprehension” (as one might argue happens in Kant).⁴ Rather, encountering Christ in Word, sacrament, and the church-community, is the result of God in Christ’s own initiative—the one who is known only according to his being towards us. The implication therefore is that the transcendence of Jesus—his being wholly other, out of the grasp of self-sufficient human epistemology—is something that one can relate to only from within the community that has faith in him as *pro nobis*. In word, sacrament and in the other person in the church-community, Bonhoeffer insists that Christ cannot be resolved into our own comprehension, but remains transcendent.

For both Bonhoeffer and Frei therefore, the Christian community exists in the complexity and ‘ambiguity’ of historical existence, but also as the locus of relationship with the transcendent Christ, known only according to his unsubstitutable particularity. The focus upon the Christian community—found both in Frei’s cultural linguistic essays and Bonhoeffer’s emphasis upon *pro me*—thus evidences again the inseparability of transcendence and historical particularity.

ii) *Mutual strengthening and critique*

a) *Frei: unsubstitutability*

Frei’s concept of *unsubstitutability* functions to point to and draw out the central importance of historical particularity for a theology of Jesus’ transcendence. Bonhoeffer is clearly not blind to the importance of Jesus’ particularity—consider his critique of Barth, the way he follows Luther to implicitly modify Kierkegaard’s *incognito*, and his own remarks on Jesus as the one in the midst of the world—but especially where that kind of emphasis is implicit rather than explicit in Bonhoeffer’s work, Frei’s term helps considerably as a conceptual gloss. In short, Frei brings a

⁴ Kathryn Tanner, ‘Jesus Christ’, in Colin Gunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), 253.

useful term to the conversation, insisting upon Jesus' historical particularity to a greater degree than Bonhoeffer does.

Frei points to the unity of Jesus' non-repeatable historicity with his saving universality in the gospels,⁵ and as such ensures that the 'who' question is always one about historicity as well as transcendence. This complements and fills out Bonhoeffer's focus on the 'who' of Jesus, highlighting how what Frei would call Jesus' unsubstitutable 'history-like-ness' is un-abstractable from any explication of Jesus identity as the counter-logos. Keeping the concept of historical unsubstitutability at the forefront of our minds when reading Bonhoeffer means that all his Christology—e.g. Christ-existing-as-community, the *theologia crucis* and the *Christuswirklichkeit*—is read explicitly as being about “the man from Nazareth who redeemed men by his helplessness, in perfect obedience enacting their good on their behalf ... was raised from the dead and manifested to be the redeemer.”⁶ Using unsubstitutability as a gloss on Bonhoeffer's work highlights how Jesus' transcendence—his being other, out of our grasp, and constitutive of our reconciliation with God—is inseparable from that which is worked out in the midst of history, i.e. his life, death and resurrection. Only as unsubstitutable and particular can Jesus really be said to transcend—otherwise the temptation to generalisation reels him into our imaginings and constructs.

I suggested that Yoder's critique of Bonhoeffer as 'logological' to the detriment of historical particularity fails to grasp the way Bonhoeffer preserves the transcendence of Jesus, but that Frei does not limit Jesus' particular identity in the way Yoder's approach threatens to. Frei's approach to historicity, explicitly resisting as it does a modernist 'grasp' of the historical Jesus, maintains an explicit posture of humility that Yoder's does not.

Furthermore, when unsubstitutability is prioritised, it becomes harder to misread Bonhoeffer as if he were collapsing the identity of Christ into the church. Readings of Bonhoeffer that verge on reducing theology to the anthropological are mitigated if one understands the way in which Frei's articulation of Jesus' historical unsubstitutability coheres conceptually with Bonhoeffer's own theological orientation.

⁵ Frei, *Identity*, 123.

⁶ Frei, *Identity*, 182.

There are, however, two complexities to this observation concerning unsubstitutability that merit mentioning—firstly, as observed in the previous chapter, in the only place where Frei writes explicitly on Bonhoeffer, the former does *not* read the latter with this emphasis in mind, but rather focusses on Bonhoeffer as a theologian of secular humanity at the expense of particular Christology; and secondly, Frei’s own work arguably does not fully follow the concept of unsubstitutability through either. On the first point, given that we are concerned only with one paragraph by Frei on Bonhoeffer, care must be taken not to disproportionately suggest that this is a highly significant misreading of Bonhoeffer on Frei’s behalf. Rather, we recognise that Bonhoeffer scholarship in the decade prior to Frei’s essay was characterised to a significant degree by a limited reading of Bonhoeffer’s work that allied Bonhoeffer with the secularisation movement—and that Frei merely seems to reflect that consensus. His assessment of Bonhoeffer is indeed a narrow one, but it is likely to be more circumstantial than a misinterpretation derived from a close reading. Current Bonhoeffer scholarship—from which this thesis benefits—allows for the coherence with Frei to be much more apparent than was the case in the 1970s, and so this project too reflects its scholarly circumstances. It is quite likely that previous lack of engagement between Frei and Bonhoeffer scholarship attests the rather limited scope of Bonhoeffer scholarship in Frei’s own time, meaning that this was a less obvious move to make then than is the case now. Particularly in the light of the current flurry of Bonhoeffer studies, a staged conversation between Frei and Bonhoeffer on the transcendence of Jesus is a more obvious project to undertake now than it was during Frei’s time.

Regarding the second complexity—whether Frei adequately applies his own concept of unsubstitutability—we are concerned with whether Frei’s focus on the passion-resurrection narratives emphasises Jesus’ unsubstitutability as the crucified and risen one to the detriment, say, of his identity as the healing, compassionate, or socially subversive one. Admittedly, Frei openly articulates his reasons for concentrating on the passion-resurrection—he believes that there the texts identify Jesus in the least mythological fashion and thus force the question of unsubstitutability in the strongest way—but the logic of committing to Jesus’ unsubstitutability allows for a reading back into the other portions of the text, insofar as Jesus’ ministry was undertaken by the

particular figure. As David Kelsey reflects in his own multifaceted explanation of Christ's unsubstitutable particularity, Jesus is narratively rendered as Jewish, gendered, one who practices "downward economic mobility", and as a particularly "social and public" figure.⁷ Allowing the concept of unsubstitutability to include the narratives of Jesus' ministry therefore means that Jesus transcends as the unsubstitutably compassionate, healing, barrier-breaking, crucified and risen one who welcomes people into the love of God. Insofar as Frei's emphasis upon unsubstitutability is developed alongside his refusal of a modernist dichotomy of faith and history, this emphasis upon Jesus' unsubstitutable ministry does not merely write a social programme into the heavens, but instead recognises that the one whose ministry is thus described remains a slippery, ungraspable figure—present now by virtue of his identity as the risen one.

Overall then, Frei's concept of unsubstitutability serves well to guide a reading of Bonhoeffer sympathetic to Bonhoeffer's own concerns, towards a robust theology of the transcendence of Jesus; and furthermore to expand Frei's own explication of the identity of Jesus to take greater account of his ministry.

b) Bonhoeffer: Theology of the cross

As Barker's very recent study shows, Bonhoeffer's Christology is profoundly shaped by, and consistently points us in the direction of, a Lutheran *theologia crucis*.⁸ I have suggested that this particular aspect of Bonhoeffer's work constitutes perhaps the most significant addition that Bonhoeffer can make to Frei, furthering greatly Frei's comments about the challenge of discipleship of Jesus who is often encountered *incognito*. Whilst Frei mentions that Kierkegaardian notion—and whilst in *Identity* he points to the crucial coherence between power and powerlessness, and the veiled activity of God, in the narrative description of Jesus' identity—Bonhoeffer provides a much more sustained reflection upon the paradox of the cross, adding significantly to a theology of Jesus' transcendence. Modifying Kierkegaard's own generalised concept of Christ's *incognito*, Bonhoeffer explicitly conjoins *incognito* with the *σκανδαλον* of Christ

⁷ David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, vol. 2., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 627–630.

⁸ H. Gaylon Barker, *The Cross of Reality: Luther's Theologia Crucis and Bonhoeffer's Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015).

crucified, to emphasise that at the heart of Jesus' elusiveness is the scandal of God in the likeness of sinful flesh. Luther understood a *theologia crucis* as referring not just to the moment of crucifixion, but pointing towards a fundamental characteristic of Christology, and Bonhoeffer too is keen to carry this theme through to reflections upon the resurrection—emphasising that the risen Christ remains for us a stumbling block by virtue of his being the risen one who was crucified.⁹ Here the paradoxical nature of Christ's transcendence is most apparent, as the supposed oppositions of sin and sinlessness, and hiddenness and revealedness, point towards God's redemptive activity towards the world in Christ. Bonhoeffer's Christology lectures constitute a peak of his exposition of this *theologia crucis*, but it is present throughout his works, and features heavily again towards the end of his life, especially in *Ethics*, where the *Christuswirklichkeit* refers to reality as constituted by the reconciliation of God and world in this crucified and risen one; and *Letters and Papers from Prison*, where the figure of the crucified one, pushed out of the world onto the cross, is the crux of the gospel for the world come of age, over against a domesticated *deus ex machina*.

If a *theologia crucis* is taken on as a way of paying attention to the scandalous form of Jesus unstitutability, Bonhoeffer's explications of Christ's identity as the crucified and risen one significantly modify a theology of the transcendence of Jesus derived from Frei. In particular, where Frei insists upon the normativity of the unstitutable person of Jesus for the *sensus literalis* of the scriptures, Bonhoeffer reminds us that the one who is normative for us is also a scandal for us, and thus out of our grasp. This point therefore constitutes something of a conceptual exchange between the two theologians: Bonhoeffer scholarship can receive the concept of unstitutability from Frei scholarship, before handing it back with the addition of a *theologia crucis*, meaning we recognise not only that Jesus's transcendence as the crucified and risen one must be articulated at the level of historical particularity (so that crucifixion and resurrection are never generalisations) but also that the historical particularity (in particular the offense of the crucifixion) must itself be seen to partially constitute his transcendence. In a sense, this can be seen as a reflection of the *communicatio idiomatum*—that the divine transcendence of Jesus is worked out fully through his humanity, and therefore his historical particularity. To put it quite bluntly, Bonhoeffer

⁹ See chapter 6 for a discussion of this point in dialogue with Rachel Muers and Rowan Williams.

helps Frei scholarship elucidate the *difficulty* of Jesus whilst maintaining his unsubstitutability. As the transcendent one, Jesus is an unsubstitutable paradox.

Furthermore, Jesus' transcendence is not merely an abstract element of his identity, as if he is firstly who he is, and then transcendent on top of that. Rather, if Bonhoeffer's *theologia crucis* is allowed to indicate the profoundly scandalous way in which Christ is out of our grasp—i.e. as the one crucified and risen for our salvation—then, to use Anderson's term, God's historical transcendence is understood to be at one with his saving work.¹⁰

c) *Frei: Figural reading*

In *Eclipse*, Frei introduces figural reading as a practice of pre-critical hermeneutics, by virtue of which historical characters and events are read as types or figures of God's activity in Christ, without such characters or events losing historical particularity. Particularly in his later essays about the *sensus literalis* of the biblical texts, he further explicates the link between this practice and the 'narrative' or 'literal' reading of the gospels advocated in *Identity*. Without losing their own historical integrity, characters and events are understood to find their fulfillment in the transcendent Christ whose identity must be articulated in a history-like way. The suggestion here is that this kind of figural reading is consistent with the Christological ontology Bonhoeffer develops in *Ethics*, and helps to articulate how the concept of *Christuswirklichkeit* can see history prior to the incarnation as related to God's activity of reconciliation—outside of which Bonhoeffer believes there is no reality or true historicity. In other words, figural reading helps to elucidate the place of world-history in Bonhoeffer's cosmic Christology. If, as Bonhoeffer says in *Ethics*, "only God's becoming human makes possible an action that is genuinely in accord with reality",¹¹ then the perception that

¹⁰ This emphasis mitigates what Tanner recognises as a tendency for the *pro me* of Christ to be explicated merely with regard to a modernist theory of revelation rather than with regard to his saving work. "The *pro me* for Luther concerned a dimension of the reality of Christ's working. That Christ accomplished what he did *for us* is part of the reality of the matter; apprehension of the gospel stories that failed to apply them to one's own life would not, then, be true to reality. Now, however, the *pro me* falls simply on the side of human apprehension; it is simply identified with the process by which human subjects make the gospel message their own." Tanner, 'Jesus', 253.

¹¹ *E*, 223–224; and again, "[s]ince God became a human being in Christ, all thinking about human beings without Christ is unfruitful abstraction." *E*, 134.

the particularities of history were able to typologically shadow that reality even before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth is a helpful gloss. More critically, where Bonhoeffer says that history becomes “thoroughly temporal”¹² only with the incarnation, the way Frei describes figural reading allows for us to speak of history constituted by Christ, without the suggestion that before the incarnation, the world was, in Bonhoeffer’s words, merely the “transient bearer of eternal values.”¹³ Of course, Bonhoeffer has a theology of the fall in Adam and redemption in Christ, and so any suggestion that reality remains identical prior- and post-incarnation flattens out an ultimate shift in reality—that God reconciles an estranged world to Godself. Nevertheless, insofar as the Old Testament narrates characters and events in the history of Israel that exist, by God’s providential work, in relation to Christ, it seems reasonable to speak of them as in accordance with reality in their historical particularity. Bonhoeffer himself does practice and describe figural reading, but does so with less attention to maintaining the integrity of the historical particularity of the pre-Christological type than Frei does. Therefore, with regard to nuancing Bonhoeffer’s forthright insistence that there is simply no reality outside of God’s becoming human, Frei’s concept of figural reading serves better. What this means for a theology of the transcendence of Jesus is that the relation of all history to the unsubstitutable incarnate, crucified and risen one, who is beyond us in his historicity, need not utterly dismiss all human history before the coming of Christ as ‘sub-reality’.

d) *Bonhoeffer: Participatory Ontology*

As Tuomo Mannermaa summarises, Luther’s theology has a robust sense of participation in the person of Christ by faith,¹⁴ and Bonhoeffer’s notion of *Christuswirklichkeit* explicates this participation in cosmic-ethical terms—terms that ground the ways in which *Ethics* in particular evidences Bonhoeffer’s ability to negotiate theological extremes. I have suggested that, when applied to Frei’s work, the call for human beings to participate in the transcendent person of Christ helps to articulate the ontological dimension of the kind of theology Frei believes is ‘hospitable’

¹² *E*, 104.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Tuomo Mannermaa, ‘Justification and *Theosis* in Lutheran-Orthodox Perspective’, in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 32.

to the *sensus literalis*.¹⁵ This ontological dimension, then, is linked to theology that makes for a ‘generous orthodoxy’ and that looks towards a middle way between the radically closed or non-descriptively open. Therefore, having just explained the way Frei’s concept of *figura* helps to theologically ‘steady’ Bonhoeffer’s *Christuswirklichkeit*, here we note how the latter concept articulates a more explicitly ontological framework for Frei’s theology, and that this ontological framework points towards the possibility for Christian theology to inhabit confidence and humility simultaneously.

Bonhoeffer’s rejection of realm-thinking (*Raumdenken*), of radicalism and compromise, and his theology of ultimacy and penultimacy, all belong in this participatory framework—geared as they are towards the understanding that the integrity of the historical world is grounded in its asymmetrical relationship to God in Christ. Where realm-thinking splits off the realm of Christ or the church from the worldly, where radicalism explicitly puts Christ in opposition with the world, and where compromise deposits the reality of God “completely beyond daily life,”¹⁶ Bonhoeffer rejects such thinking in favour of a theology of ultimacy and penultimacy, whereby the dichotomy is overcome by understanding that God’s transcendent act towards the world in Christ gives the world its integrity. Because God has acted *in* the world and *for* the world in Jesus Christ, the world can exist in freedom given to it by God, grounded in the person of Christ.

Bonhoeffer’s notion of ultimacy and penultimacy therefore offers a participatory-ontological framework in which to understand Frei’s pointers to how theology might relate flexibly, humbly and confidently towards external disciplines. The priority of high Christology that Frei believes characterises the *sensus literalis* might be expressed as the ‘ultimate’, and this is understood to norm but not devalue those external disciplines—philosophy, sociology and suchlike—that we might call ‘penultimate’. Frei’s ‘generous orthodoxy’ thus coheres quite naturally with Bonhoeffer’s participatory ontology.

¹⁵ Ben Fulford briefly makes a similar point as regards the benefit of a participatory ontology for Frei in his suggestion that Frei be fruitfully read with Gregory of Nazianzus. Fulford joins this with another brief suggestion that an “incorporative pneumatology” would also substantiate Frei’s work, a question to which I attend below in relation to both Frei and Bonhoeffer. Ben Fulford, *Divine Eloquence and Human Transformation: Rethinking Scripture and History through Gregory of Nazianzus and Hans Frei* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 277.

¹⁶ *E*, 153.

Of course, for both theologians, Christological normativity (Frei) or Christological participatory ontology (Bonhoeffer) is explicated always with reference to the particular person of Jesus—the crucified and risen one. Here again, this time in a more explicitly cosmic sense, we have an instance of Bonhoeffer contributing a *theologia crucis* to Frei, for just as Frei’s *sensus literalis* always has the unsubstitutable identity of Jesus at its heart, Bonhoeffer’s Christological ontology in *Ethics* cannot be abstracted from a *theologia crucis*. Therefore, using Bonhoeffer’s participatory ontology to frame Frei’s ‘type’ of theology once again highlights the complex, mysterious and often difficult aspects of Jesus Christ’s historically unsubstitutable identity as the one who ‘enacts the good of humanity on their behalf’, and in whose person the world finds its reality.

Again, we have a sense of mutual exchange between the two theologians, towards a strong understanding of the relationship between the transcendence of Jesus Christ and a ‘middle way’ for theology. Given the way in which the *Christuswirklichkeit* grounds aspects of Bonhoeffer’s thought that feature significantly in his identification as a ‘middle way’ theologian—i.e. what DeJonge calls his rejection of “oppositional thinking”¹⁷—it makes sense that this ontological dimension to his Christology be brought into conversation with the aspects of Frei’s theology where his desire to mediate extremes is most evident.

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Frei’s concepts of unsubstitutability and his explication of the praxis of figural reading, and Bonhoeffer’s *theologia crucis* and his participatory ontology, allow each theologian to add significant theological depth to the other’s work, towards a stronger account of a theology of the transcendence of Jesus that in turn grounds a simultaneous confidence and humility. Insistence upon the unsubstitutability of Jesus highlights not only the coherence of his identity with God in the history-like narratives, but also the

¹⁷ DeJonge, ‘Between Fundamentalism and Secularism: Bonhoeffer’s Negotiation of Oppositional Pairs in *Ethics* and its Precedent in *Act and Being*’, in John DeGruchy, Stephen Plant, Christiane Tietz (eds.), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Theology Today: A Way Between Fundamentalism and Secularism* (München: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 2009), 75.

scandal of the humiliation of God in the likeness of sinful flesh, by virtue of which Jesus is all the more out of our grasp—i.e. transcendent. This scandalous aspect of his transcendence pertains to his identity as the risen one, present now in the church by word and sacrament, and in one another. Thus the coherence of historicity and transcendence focusses on the scandal of the unsubstitutable one who cannot be thought of as not-raised and is present now. It is this person—revealed in hiddenness—that Christians understand to norm their reading of the scriptures and of their own lives; and indeed this person in whom God reconciles the world to Godself that they are called to participate. It is this person who grounds both their confidence in the world reconciled to God and their own epistemological incapacity—their knowledge that God’s work in Christ is not about having all the answers delivered into their hands but is confidently participating in his life-for-others. Awareness of the unsubstitutable paradox of the transcendent Christ strengthens the quest for a way between closed and wide-open religion.

II

The Holy Spirit: Generosity not Generalisation

Chapters 3 and 4 briefly suggested how a more explicit pneumatology might fill out the account of the transcendence of Jesus derived from Frei’s theology. This section revisits those suggestions, recognising that such a move is appropriate to Bonhoeffer’s theology too. Whilst Bonhoeffer wrote considerably more about the Spirit than Frei, the texts of his that I have drawn upon most fully for a theology of Jesus’ transcendence are less pneumatologically explicit.

Chapters 3 and 4 noted Frei’s lack of attention to the person of the Holy Spirit in the gospel narratives, and a lack of attention to the pneumatological dimension of the Christian community for whom the unsubstitutable identity of Jesus is normative—both in terms of the original apostolic community and the contemporary church—particularly in terms of the nexus between community and text (Fulford labels this Frei’s need for an “incorporative pneumatology”).¹⁸ Although the recent publication

¹⁸ Fulford, *Divine*, 277.

of archival texts by Frei makes available a brief essay on pneumatology, ‘Of the Holy Ghost’, there Frei concentrates on the gift of the Spirit that directs Christians towards a communal life of justice, mercy and humility, and the relationship between the Spirit, the Son and the community remains relatively unexplored.¹⁹ In articulating how the doctrine of the Spirit grounds the outward-looking-ness and compassion of the Christian community, Frei is linking the pneumatological to his desire for ‘generous orthodoxy’,²⁰ but not explicitly highlighting the links between this and the aspects of Christology that also make for this characteristic of flexible generosity and love.

Chapter 3 suggested that Eugene Rogers’ application of Frei’s methods of identity description to a study of the Spirit in her narrated interactions with the Son, promisingly highlights the coherence between a personal pneumatology and the historical particularity of the unsubstitutable Jesus.²¹ When this coherence is explicated—i.e. when we understand the Spirit through her personal relation and narrated interaction with the unsubstitutable person of the Son—we are able to speak more confidently about the unsubstitutable Jesus really being present to the community of faith by the same Spirit. In other words, where Frei insists that it is always the *Jesus of the narratives* who is present, Rogers (along with others like David Kelsey, who also seeks a more Trinitarian reading of Frei’s unsubstitutable Christology)²² points us towards saying that it is always the *Spirit of the narratives* by whose work he is present. Pneumatology, therefore, does not point to the generalisation of Jesus’ identity—nor, as Kelsey highlights, to a divine “freedom of arbitrariness”²³—but to the intentional generosity of God the Father who gives the

¹⁹ Hans W. Frei, ‘Of the Holy Ghost’, in Hans W. Frei, *Reading Faithfully (vol. 1) Writings from the Archives: Theology and Hermeneutics*, edited by Mike Higon and Mark Alan Bowald (Oregon: Cascade: 2015), 191–195.

²⁰ Frei, ‘Holy Ghost’, 194–195.

²¹ Eugene Rogers, *After the Spirit: A Constructive Pneumatology from Resources Outside the Modern West* (London: SCM, 2006), 7.

²² E.g. Kelsey, *Eccentric*, vol. 2., 621.

²³ Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, vol. 1., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 451. “To say that it is the Spirit ‘with the Son’ who draws humankind to the eschatological consummation is to stress that the triune God relates to us in this mode in a particular, concrete way as the advent of the fulfillment of an open ended promise by God to all that is not God.” *Ibid.*

Son, who in turn is present in the church by the equally given Spirit, and in whose likeness the Spirit fashions the church.²⁴

Chapter 4 highlighted that despite Frei's brief attention to the centrality of the Holy Spirit in Calvin's doctrine of scripture, he does not really articulate a pneumatological dimension to his explication of the *sensus literalis* of the Biblical text. As Placher says, "a sociologist may note that the Bible takes on its character as 'Scripture' because of its use in the church community, but, Calvin would insist, from a *theological* perspective Christians must claim that the church *recognizes* Scripture rather than *making* Scripture—and it recognizes thanks to the work of the Holy Spirit."²⁵ Thus, by highlighting more explicitly the intentional role of the Holy Spirit in witnessing to Christ through Scripture, the theological dimension of the *sensus literalis* is better explained, insofar as the normativity of the identity of Christ for the community is understood to be work of the transcendent Spirit. Jesus' transcendence is thus better preserved, for the appeal to the mysterious and free work of the Spirit prevents a collapse of the identity of Christ into a mere community consensus. To join this to the above, this means that as well as mitigating any generalisation of the identity of Christ, pneumatology also mitigates *exclusivity*, for the significance of the unsubstitutable person of Jesus for the Christian community is again dependent upon the widely distributed gift of the Spirit from the Father, not merely upon the hermetically sealed practices of the community. Therefore, if the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus and in the Christian community is highlighted to a greater extent than Frei does, then an articulation of Jesus' transcendence in terms of historical particularity is more theologically robust, and once more, the community's self-understanding develops a more Trinitarian shape.

Turning to Bonhoeffer, there is considerably more pneumatological material available—especially in *Sanctorum Communio* and *Discipleship* but also in peripheral essays and lectures. However, in the texts where Bonhoeffer's Christology is most fully

²⁴ Kelsey also emphasises how language about the Father's giving of the Son expresses the wholly gratuitous way in which God relates to creation, and draws it towards its eschatological consummation in Godself. Kelsey, *Eccentric*, vol. 1., 447.

²⁵ William B. Placher, *The Triune God: An Essay in Postliberal Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 93.

worked out—and especially where the *theologia crucis* shapes a theology of Jesus’ transcendence—sustained reflection upon the Holy Spirit is notably absent.

Positively, Bonhoeffer’s earlier work reflects the New Testament focus upon the necessarily communal aspect of pneumatology, and its inextricable link to the person of Jesus.²⁶ As Mawson describes, *Sanctorum Communio* understands the Holy Spirit as sanctifying the church community so that its corporate life (or in more Hegelian terms its ‘objective spirit’) is a witness to Christ.²⁷ This is not about the potential of people to be Christ-like, but about the Holy Spirit actualising God’s revelation.²⁸ Being unprepared to think pneumatologically in abstraction from God’s revelation in Christ in community (his pneumatology in *Sanctorum Communio* is inseparable both from the church and from Christ)²⁹ Bonhoeffer concentrates on the Holy Spirit’s work in actualising the revelation of Christ—i.e. drawing individuals into the community that is being shaped as the body Christ.³⁰ Crucially, as Mawson recognises, Bonhoeffer does not collapse the objective spirit of a community together with the Holy Spirit, but sees the latter as working through the former. Therefore, even in its fallible and sinful form, the church is “integral to God’s revelation”,³¹ being a community in which the Spirit actualises the likeness of Christ through love of neighbour and God.³² Also, in *Life Together* Bonhoeffer reflects again upon the community of Christians as the

²⁶ From the experiences recorded in Acts onwards, “the Spirit now is not simply a mysterious power, but a power stamped with the character of Jesus, God’s empowering presence has the face of Jesus Christ.” James D. G. Dunn, *The Christ and The Spirit*, vol. 2: *Pneumatology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 341.

²⁷ Mawson, Michael, ‘The Spirit and the Community: Pneumatology and Ecclesiology in Jenson, Hütter and Bonhoeffer’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* (15, 2013), 464. “The objective spirit is ... an *expression* of the community that is moved by the Holy Spirit”. *SC*, 266.

²⁸ *SC*, 144.

²⁹ “As Christ and the new humanity now necessarily belong together, so the Holy Spirit must be understood as being at work only in this new humanity. It is evidently a mistake, therefore, to attempt to reflect on the objective work of the Holy Spirit independently of the church-community.” *SC*, 144. “Community with God only exists through Christ, but Christ is present only in his church-community, and therefore *community with God exists only in the church*.” *SC*, 158. Note that Bonhoeffer does not believe that persons have no individual relationship with God. On the contrary, he emphasises the work of the Spirit in justification as that which occurs in pure isolation. However, the individual is always called back in to the community where they encounter God.

³⁰ As notes from a 1935 lecture on the Holy Spirit at Finkenwalde put it: “The Holy Spirit establishes the relationship between the members of the body and the head.” *TEF*, 456.

³¹ Mawson, ‘Spirit’, 464–465.

³² *SC*, 168.

gift and work of the Spirit, and also upon the Spirit as the “ruler” of the community, over against human desires for “power, honour and rule”.³³

Therefore, regarding the absence of much reflection by Frei upon the community as the *work* of the Spirit, Bonhoeffer’s theology acts as a useful supplement in recognising that the church is the transcendent work of God, with its reality residing not in human possibility but in grace. Furthermore, that aspect of Bonhoeffer’s pneumatology that Mawson recognises—that the Lutheran doctrine of *simul iustus et peccator* is reflected pneumatologically as the Holy Spirit is ontologically distinguished from the objective spirit—lends an important addition to Frei’s scholarship too, insofar as the fallibility of the church is theologically articulated. This kind of pneumatological clarification also highlights that the generosity and flexibility that Frei wants to associate with theology ‘hospitable’ to the *sensus literalis* must be understood as the Spirit’s work and not simply identical with the ‘objective spirit’ of a community that thinks and practices in a certain way. Bonhoeffer’s distinction between objective spirit and Holy Spirit therefore adds a theological nuance to Frei’s cultural linguistic descriptions.

In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer describes the work of the Spirit in the hearts of baptised believers. “Jesus Christ remains present with us”, and “we are in communion with him” in a way as strong as, if not stronger than, his first disciples.³⁴ Focussing on the *bodily* communion that Christians have with Jesus by virtue of being in his body—the church-community—Bonhoeffer tantalizingly links pneumatology with a *theologia crucis*:

Through the Holy Spirit, the crucified and risen Christ exists as the church-community, as the ‘new human being’. For Christ truly is and eternally remains the incarnate one, and the new humanity truly is his body.³⁵

As far as Bonhoeffer is concerned in *Discipleship*, then, it is the Holy Spirit through whom the church-community is the community “of the crucified and transfigured body of Jesus Christ”, through whom its members “take part in Christ’s suffering and

³³ *LT*, 40.

³⁴ *D*, 210.

³⁵ *D*, 220.

glory.”³⁶ It is not too much of a leap, then, to suggest that the work of the Holy Spirit is to make contemporaneous the *σκανδαλον* of Christ, whose historically particular humiliation in the likeness of sinful flesh is the form in which the church-community participates.³⁷

Looking back to Bonhoeffer’s student days, a seminar paper written for Karl Holl in 1926 also explicates the interdependency of Christology, pneumatology and faith in Luther’s thought (though here more at the level of the individual than the community). Overall, reflecting both the Spirit as Christ’s gift, and Christ as the gift of the Spirit, Bonhoeffer summarises Luther’s pneumatology as follows: “faith from the Spirit, Christ in faith, Spirit from Christ, and therefore in faith Christ gives the Spirit. This is the essential interrelationship.”³⁸ Whilst not evidencing the fully-fledged *theologia crucis* of the lectures, Bonhoeffer recognises, via Luther, that “in faith, which is the action of the Holy Spirit, we grasp the *pro nobis* of [Christ’s] death and resurrection ... In that we grasp this, we possess Christ as a gift.”³⁹ Therefore, the relation of Christians to the crucified and risen one is the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

However, in the lectures, as well as in *Ethics* and in *Letters and Papers*, these pneumatological implications may be assumed by Bonhoeffer but are not really explicated to any significant extent. The role of the Holy Spirit in connecting believers to the unsubstitutable *σκανδαλον* of Jesus is left unarticulated, and the participatory ontology of the *Christuswirklichkeit* lacks a pneumatological edge. Whilst, as shown above, one cannot accuse Bonhoeffer of lacking pneumatology altogether, Nowers’ description of Bonhoeffer’s pneumatology as “latent” seems appropriate;⁴⁰ and the

³⁶ *D*, 221.

³⁷ *D*, 216. In the interests of a balanced picture, I note that in *Discipleship* Bonhoeffer’s pneumatology is also connected with an ecclesiological exclusivity that sits less than easily alongside the emphases of *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers*, particularly the former’s denunciation of ‘realm-thinking’—something which seems more prevalent in *Discipleship*, and perhaps reflects an aspect of Bonhoeffer’s later discomfort with some of his arguments therein (see *LPP*, 486). In *Discipleship*, he says, “[t]he seal of the Holy Spirit seals off the church-community from the world ... Sanctification through the seal of the Holy Spirit always places the church in the midst of struggle ... Separation of the world from the church, and separation of the church from the world, is the holy struggle of the church for God’s sacred realm on the earth.” *D*, 261–262.

³⁸ *IB*, 337.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Jeff Nowers, ‘Hegel, Bonhoeffer and Objective Geist’, in Adam C. Clark and Michael Mawson (eds.), *Ontology and Ethics: Bonhoeffer and Contemporary Scholarship* (Oregon: Pickwick, 2013), 48.

consequence of this latency is a poverty of theological reflection upon the nexus between the unsubstitutable scandalous form of Christ and the community in relationship to him. If, as Harvey puts it, Bonhoeffer shows that it is “in and through the church-community, gathered together in the power of the Holy Spirit, that the historical particularity of Christ is universalised and his universality made particular in an actual concrete mode of sociality”,⁴¹ then according to Bonhoeffer’s own Christology, that universalising work of the Spirit must be articulated in relation to a *theologia crucis*.

To begin with, we can use Bonhoeffer’s own pointers in *Sanctorum Communio* and *Discipleship* as a starting point, and join those with the way Rogers and others connect the identity of the Spirit with the particular bodily life of Christ, towards saying the following: the Spirit acts in union with and actualises the community of the unsubstitutable Christ—the stumbling block, the crucified and risen one, the one who transcends by virtue of his hiddenness in revelation, in whom God is towards the world reconciling it to himself. The transcendence of Jesus as God towards the world in the crucified and risen one is contemporaneous transcendence by virtue of the work of the Holy Spirit, who as the one who rested on the body of the Son,⁴² is the one by whom word, sacrament and community are the presence of Christ now. As we remarked in relation to Frei, far from being a generalisation of Christ’s identity, pneumatology emphasises that it is by the particular person of the Spirit—active in the life of Jesus—that the unsubstitutable scandalous Jesus Christ is transcendent towards us, *pro me*, now. His particular identity is generously given for and to us, rather than generalised, meaning that particularity is kept from turning into exclusivity. The scandalous transcendence of Christ arrives for us in the generous pouring out of the Spirit (Rom 5:5). In short, generalisation gives way to generosity—the inclusion of many into the body of Christ.

Explicating this pneumatological dimension of Bonhoeffer’s *theologia crucis* in fact reflects little more than a thorough reading of Paul. The passages that are most

⁴¹ Barry Harvey, ‘The Narrow Path: Sociality, Ecclesiology, and the Polyphony of Life in the Thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’, in Jens Zimmerman and Brian Gregor (eds.), *Being Human, Becoming Human: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Social Thought* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2010), 123.

⁴² Rogers, *After*, 71.

central to Bonhoeffer's Christology (1 Corinthians 1:21–24 and Gal 5:11) belong in the context of profoundly pneumatological texts that elucidate the role of the Spirit in revelation, the gifts of the Spirit to the community of faith, the life of the Spirit opposed to the life of the flesh, and the fruit of the Spirit, to name but a few themes. Because a *theologia crucis* therefore belongs in the context of the life of the church in the Spirit, an explication of the transcendence of Jesus focussed upon his unsubstitutability as the crucified and risen one who is the *σκανδαλον*, should not be content with a merely latent pneumatology, but should strive to articulate, and give thanks for, the active role of the generous Spirit.

Secondly, the participatory ontology of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* can also be pneumatologically supplemented towards a theologically fuller account of the relation of Christians to the transcendent Christ. Commenting upon the cohesion between the "pneumatologically loaded" Eastern *theosis* traditions and Lutheran ideas of participation in Christ (a cohesion, we recall, recovered by Tuomo Mannermaa in the latter parts of the twentieth century) Kärkkäinen summarises a pneumatological gloss on Luther that also supplements Bonhoeffer well:

Pneumatological implications of this new approach to Lutheran scholarship are obvious. The main idea, Christ present through faith, can be expressed pneumatologically: It is through the Spirit of Christ that salvatory gifts are mediated. Participation in God is only possible through the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of adoption.⁴³

Other than a brief and rather round about pointer to the Spirit's role in realising God's reality in Christ,⁴⁴ Bonhoeffer's explication of *Christuswirklichkeit* in 'Christ, Reality and Good' does not illuminate this pneumatological dimension. Recalling Nowers, we might positively say that *Sanctorum Communio*'s pneumatology is latent in

⁴³ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 86.

⁴⁴ "The subject matter of a Christian ethic is God's reality revealed in Christ becoming real among God's creatures, just as the subject matter of doctrinal theology is the truth of God's reality revealed in Christ. The place that in all other ethics is marked by the antithesis between ought and is, idea and realization, motive and work, is occupied in Christian ethics by the relation between reality and becoming real, between past and present, between history and event (faith) or, to replace the many concepts with the simple name of the thing itself, the relation between Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The question of the good becomes the question of participating in God's reality revealed in Christ." *E*, 49–50.

Ethics, but again, the fact that *Ethics*—like the Christology lectures—evidences a depth to Bonhoeffer’s *theologia crucis* shaped Christology not present in *Sanctorum Communio*, means that we are lacking an explicit pneumatology at the point at which Bonhoeffer’s Christology is most developed.⁴⁵ He does briefly link the community that bears the form of the crucified and risen Christ and with the receipt of the gift of the Spirit,⁴⁶ but overall, the thinness of this kind of reference means that it can seem sometimes as if the Spirit gets left behind.

What needs to be made explicit, is that participation in the *Christuswirklichkeit*—by which Christians take the form of Christ in responsible action towards God and neighbour—is a ministry of the Holy Spirit. Participation in the scandalous form of the crucified and risen one is anything but exemplarism, but results from the transcendent gratuitous act of God the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, in relation to ultimacy and penultimacy, we can speak of the Spirit directing the penultimate to the ultimate. To connect this to *Sanctorum Communio*, the Spirit who sanctifies the objective spirit of the church-community is the Spirit who sanctifies the penultimate, the worldly, such that the world can be itself directed toward Christ. The penultimate can exist towards the ultimate because of God’s continued gracious sanctifying activity by the Holy Spirit.

The same goes for the participatory aspect of *Letters and Papers*—i.e. participation in Christ the man for others, the suffering God pushed out of the world for world’s redemption. Illumination of the role of the Holy Spirit in the relationship between the transcendent Christ and Christian believers again mitigates any charge of exemplarism, or that taking the form of Christ is an action performed only by humanity. Supplementing Bonhoeffer’s participatory ontology with pneumatology therefore allows for a fuller explanation of the transcendence of Jesus, rather than leaving a theological gap when it comes to our contemporary relationship to him. This kind of gap is evident, for example, where Barker quite rightly interprets Bonhoeffer’s Christology as one of God’s ‘slippery’ otherness and transcendence in

⁴⁵ The editors of *Ethics* elect to explicate the text by relating *Ethics* to *Sanctorum Communio* in order to highlight the pneumatological dimension, e.g. *E*, 7.n.24, 9, 135.n.6.

⁴⁶ “Transfigured into the form of the risen one, they bear here only the sign of the cross and judgement. In bearing them willingly, they show themselves as those who have received the Holy Spirit and are united with Christ in incomparable love and community.” *E*, 95.

Christ, but describes the final ‘knowing’ of Christ without recourse to God’s activity in the Spirit.

Bonhoeffer was indeed saying that the real God, rather than our images of God, is incarnate and therefore present in Christ ... If we think we have identified God, therefore, we are sadly mistaken, for to do so would imply that we can somehow or other control God. But God always wiggles away, is always beyond our grasp ... Therefore, if we want to know God, our only recourse is to show up where God is present—on the cross.⁴⁷

Obviously there is merit in exhorting Christians to ‘show up at the cross’—for example, by corporate and individual attention to the scriptures, spiritual disciplines, in worship, liturgy and observing the church’s seasons—but our ‘knowing’ God in Christ is not merely dependent upon our showing up in the right place. As Bonhoeffer’s paper on Luther’s pneumatology highlighted so early in his studies, we are dependent upon the transcendent gift and act of the Spirit, through whom eyes of faith are opened and we are invited into relationship with God in the unsubstitutable transcendent Jesus.⁴⁸

Contrary to Barker’s summary that “the Holy Spirit is *a way of talking* about the presence of God in the world”⁴⁹ (remember that at points Frei implies this too) we recall again Rogers’ emphasis upon the narrative particularity of the Spirit, emphasising that like Jesus, the *person* of the Spirit precedes our Spirit-talk. If pneumatology is about a linguistic tool alone, it is emptied of transcendence, and the person of the Spirit is generalised into a theme—much like the fate of the Christ of the mythophiles in Frei. To join the conceptual dots and employ Placher’s terminology, we end up with a domesticated pneumatology. There is no problem in saying that pneumatological language develops as a result of faith—that is wholly appropriate—but only if, as Bonhoeffer and Frei insist so strongly as regards Christology, the identity is understood to precede the presence. The one present in the world, who, as John V. Taylor puts it, confronts us with and opens our eyes to the “unique

⁴⁷ Barker, *The Cross*, 438.

⁴⁸ 1 Cor 2:10–11; *YB*, 339; Placher, *The Triune God*, 90.

⁴⁹ Barker, *The Cross*, 141. My italics.

significance” of Jesus, simply *is* the Holy Spirit.⁵⁰ If, however, pneumatology proceeds from faith in the activity of God, narrated in the gospels (especially Luke) and Acts, then we are not speaking in generalisations, but in faith in God’s specific, personal, generous work. Again, purposeful generosity must trump generalisation. Therefore, the kind of pneumatology that we are claiming as a supplement to a theology of Jesus’ transcendence derived from Frei and Bonhoeffer, applies some of their Christological insights about the irreducible and undomesticated person of Jesus to the person of the Spirit too. A theology of the undomesticated transcendence of Jesus requires the undomesticated transcendence of the Spirit. Taylor again:

[T]he only way forward is to repudiate our contemporary ‘flat earthers’—the thinkers who reduce every vertical to a horizontal, all language to the literal meaning of words, all faith to an intention to behave in a certain way, all relation with God to a relation with men. The very conclusion I have reached in this study of the Holy Spirit falls to the ground if we will not reaffirm the ‘beyondness’ of the beyond-in-the-midst.⁵¹

As evidenced in the above passage, and in my view quite legitimately, Taylor takes up Bonhoeffer’s language about Jesus to point to the *Spirit* as the ‘beyond in the midst’, who like Christ cannot be resolved into a myth or objectified in relation to our own understanding (recall Bonhoeffer on Christ the counter-Logos).⁵² In a way that befits Rogers’ emphasis, Taylor articulates this undomesticated pneumatology in relation to the particular unsubstitutable life of Jesus as well as to the Spirit’s role in opening our eyes to Christ.⁵³ This makes Taylor’s work a good locus for reflection on a pneumatology that is complimentary to both Frei and Bonhoeffer. For example, especially important for a pneumatological supplement of Bonhoeffer’s *theologia crucis* is Taylor’s explicit reflection on the pneumatological dimensions of the historically particular humiliation of Christ on the cross, asking “What was the Holy Spirit doing at Calvary?”⁵⁴ The Spirit, he then reflects, is the one mysteriously active in the “eternal employ between the Father and the Son”—the paradoxical union of

⁵⁰ John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and The Christian Mission* (London: SCM, 1972), 103, 20.

⁵¹ Taylor, *Go-Between*, 224.

⁵² Taylor, *Go-Between*, 5. C.f. *LPP*, 367; *B*, 302.

⁵³ E.g. “Jesus, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and to whom the Holy Spirit has been directing man’s attention ever since.” Taylor, *Go-Between*, 36.

⁵⁴ Taylor, *Go-Between*, 102.

forsakenness and love—and in the recognition of Jesus by the thief on the cross and the centurion—a recognition that, “whatever it means, was the start of a turning of eyes that has been going on ever since.”⁵⁵ Furthermore, like Rogers, Taylor is attentive to the role of the Spirit in the resurrection, in which Jesus is vindicated and witnessed to as Messiah and the second Adam—a vindication and witness that the Spirit continues to effect as eyes are opened to Christ, to the glory of the Father.⁵⁶ And indeed, for Taylor (in a most ‘Bonhoefferian’ way) the Christ to whom eyes are opened is truly undomesticated in his particularity:

For loving him whom we think we know, we are drawn to that Lord Jesus who transcends our knowing. But all too often we have lost him amid our enthusiasm. What dominates our mind is not the figure of Jesus of Nazareth but our New Testament studies, not the living Saviour but the doctrines of salvation, not Christ in the neighbour but the civil rights movement.

This is not a plea for pietism but for adoration. The Jesus of history, whensoever we discern him, is not a topic of debate but a master and brother to be loved and followed.⁵⁷

What Taylor describes, then, is that by the Spirit, Jesus is present to us in his scandalous and transcendent particularity, yet in such a way that this particularity is not exclusive *per se*. The Spirit’s generous and loving witness to Christ opens our eyes, and in faith we participate in the reality of God’s reconciliation of the world to Godself in Christ.

On this point, Anderson, though not reflecting extensively on the *person* of the Spirit, offers as full a summary as any—reflecting on the work of the Spirit as one with God’s act of historical transcendence in Christ, by which the community is formed in the likeness of the unsubstitutable Jesus.

It is the transcendence of God which constitutes each person in the kenotic community; first of all, through the historical transcendence of the Son of God by which the appropriate human response is made from the furthest side of human estrangement, so that the weakest of human flesh *already* possesses a

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Taylor, *Go-Between*, 102–103.

⁵⁷ Taylor, *Go-Between*, 241.

place of participation; and then through the Holy Spirit who takes each person's actual life into fellowship with Christ. This life in the Spirit has its ground in the historical life of Christ himself, but has concrete expression in the life of the community itself—such as it is.⁵⁸

Pneumatology can therefore be the locus of a theologically deep union of particularity, transcendence, and generosity. In witnessing to Christ confidently and yet generously, Christians are participating in, yet not resolved into, the work of the Spirit. In orienting the community to Christ in whose form it participates, the Spirit “speaks from the incapacity of community to complete itself”⁵⁹ (following Bonhoeffer, we might call this the penultimacy of the community) such that witness is always to the transcendent Christ, not one who has been resolved into other people. To summarise by pneumatologically supplementing Frei's terminology, generous orthodoxy with the transcendence of Jesus at the heart reflects and participates in the ministry of God the Holy Spirit.

III

Closing Summaries

Overall, then, what kind of theology of the transcendence of Jesus emerges from reading Frei and Bonhoeffer together, and how is this project useful for the question of a ‘middle way’ type theology? Below, I present a reading of John 20:19–23, that reflects narratively upon the unsubstitutability of Jesus' transcendence, and also figurally upon the way the passage presents helpful images for thinking about the particular challenges the transcendence of Jesus presents to post-enlightenment thinking and religious praxis. Finally, I reflect upon how a project like this can raise a kind of theological and/or ecclesiological ‘self-awareness’ that points towards the need for Christological reflection.

⁵⁸ Ray S. Anderson, *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God: A Christological Critique* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), 235.

⁵⁹ Anderson, *Historical*, 250.

i) *A reading of John 20:19–23*

[19] *When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'* [20] *After he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.* [21] *Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'* [22] *When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. [23] If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'* (NRSV)

In the light of the above explorations, this passage reflects back to us some crucial elements of the theology of the transcendence of Jesus that have arisen from reading Frei and Bonhoeffer together. To be clear, what is involved here is not a suggestion that behind the particular narrative in John 20 is a more general meaning concerning a deeper or more universal 'truth' of the passage. That way, of course, lies all that Frei explicitly rejects. Instead, this reading involves something more like figural reading, even though we are less concerned with how one thing or person is a type or figure of Christ who is the fulfillment, and more how one historical particularity can be thought of in relation to Jesus as he appears in another historically particular narrative. In other words, we are considering how Jesus' impact upon the disciples' situation in the narrative, and his impact upon the contemporary epistemological situation of domesticated transcendence, cohere in the light of his particular identity as the crucified and risen one. The 'who' of Jesus allows for the narrative of the disciples' encounter with him in a locked room to be connected meaningfully—not in terms of supersession but rather in terms of relationship⁶⁰—with the narrative of the domestication of transcendence.

This passage is not alone amongst post-resurrection narratives in being in a domestic scene,⁶¹ and insofar as it narrates a negatively boundaried domesticity (locked doors) into which Jesus breaks and reorients the order of things, it can help us consider the

⁶⁰ John D. Dawson, *Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California, 2001), 92.

⁶¹ E.g. Luke 24:28–31; John 21:9–14.

relationship of the transcendent Jesus to domesticating epistemological frameworks.⁶² In the narrative, the locked doors are specifically attributed to the ‘fear of the Jews’ (“who might subject them to hatreds, insult, and death”)⁶³ indicating that the reception of Mary Magdalene’s announcement to the disciples that she has seen the Lord is still enclosed in—domesticated by—fear.⁶⁴ Relatedly, proclamation of the resurrection can be enclosed or domesticated also by the kind of historical-critical anxieties that characterise post-enlightenment epistemology. The locked doors can therefore figurally illuminate for us a limiting domestication through which Jesus breaks. There is something (in the disciples’ case, fear and locked doors) inside which the proclamation of the resurrection is fitted, and is limited, and which the identity of Jesus challenges.

The risen Christ comes in, dismantling the fearful domesticity and bringing gladness. The locked door is rendered meaningless, for the risen Jesus simply appears despite “the limitations that human circumstance might impose”.⁶⁵ The domestic cannot limit nor define Jesus, and we can think of the inability of universal reason to do the same. Jesus defies the literal closed-ness of the domestic scene, a closed-ness that we parallel with the attempt to rationalise his identity in modernist epistemology.

At this stage, there are two absolutely key points in this narrative as regards this thesis. Firstly, that if we are using this passage to reflect upon Jesus’ transcendence, then the idea that transcendence is God’s being towards the world in history is narratively illuminated in the fact that Jesus *comes*, rather than departs, through locked doors. The transcendence of Jesus is his coming to his disciples. Relatedly, we can remark that the risen Christ’s transcendence of epistemological boundaries (particularly post-

⁶² For another brief allusion to this kind of reading of the locked doors, see Alan Torrance, ‘The Trinity’, in John Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), 73.

⁶³ Francis J. Moloney S.D.B., *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina vol. 4 (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 530.

⁶⁴ John 20:18. Of course, following Bonhoeffer’s own emphases and a contemporary renunciation of the implicit theological anti-semitism that has characterised history, ‘fear of the Jews’ must be read carefully and not taken to imply a generalised opposition of ‘the Jews’ to Christianity.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* Raymond Brown highlights that here John is more interested in the fear that caused the doors to be locked than he is in the fact that Jesus was able to appear through them. Brown points to 20:26 as John’s more explicit reflection upon the ability of Jesus’ body to defy such limits. The boundary itself is therefore just as important as the fact that Jesus could pass through it. Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Gospel According to John, XIII–XXI* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1971), 1020. See also Moloney, *John*, 534.

enlightenment ones) is towards the historically particular, not away from the intersection of faith and history. To be sure, what Dodd calls the “quasi-physical” form of Jesus’ appearances pushes the boundaries of the historical,⁶⁶ but as Frei would say, these narratives belong wholly—not only partially—in the history-like world, no matter how much our understanding of that world is disrupted by them.

Secondly, Jesus comes as the *wounded* one. Just as will be the case in the narrative of Thomas’ encounter with Jesus that follows, here the identification of the risen one is via the marks of his own humiliating death. “The risen Jesus is the person they had seen lifted up on a cross and whose side had been pierced with a lance”.⁶⁷ Indeed, reflecting John’s theme of the passion-resurrection as the glorification of Jesus, it is the marks of woundedness that are the cause of the disciples’ gladness.⁶⁸ Here the narrative reflects back to us that key aspect of Bonhoeffer’s theology that we used to supplement Frei—the *theologia crucis*. If we allow this narrative to guide our reflections on Jesus’ transcendence, the transcendent one is always the wounded one. The inseparability of the transcendence of Christ from his historical particularity is also the inseparability of his transcendence from his woundedness: emphasis upon historical particularity comes always with emphasis upon what Paul (and following him, Luther and Bonhoeffer) calls the *σκανδαλον*.⁶⁹

Having shown his hands and side, Jesus again speaks peace into this situation of fear, before sending the disciples as he himself has been sent. Having secured themselves inside, the disciples are sent out of the very doors they had locked, to embody the gospel of Christ through perfect love that casts out fear.⁷⁰ As Bonhoeffer knew, this being sent as Christ has been sent calls Christians not merely to the gladness of the

⁶⁶ C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: CUP, 1953), 441. Dodd indeed understands that such ‘quasi-physicality’ belongs “*in this world*.” Dodd, *Interpretation*, 442.

⁶⁷ Moloney, *John*, 531.

⁶⁸ Dodd, *Interpretation*, 441–422.

⁶⁹ Though Bonhoeffer’s *theologia crucis* points to Paul rather than to John, here it is John’s narrative that illuminates that which I have aimed to draw out of Bonhoeffer. Interestingly, the coherence of transcendence, unsubstitutability and woundedness in the narrative of John, may be the strongest possible example of Frei’s and Bonhoeffer’s strengths. Therefore, given that Bonhoeffer’s Christology could be read as mostly Pauline, and Frei concentrates mostly on Luke’s gospel, it is interesting to find a theology of Jesus’ transcendence derived from both theologians most aptly expressed in John.

⁷⁰ 1 John 4:18. The disciples, says Moloney, “are not only to be at peace and rejoice, in the midst of their fear, at the physical presence of the risen Lord; they are to be the bearers of the fruits of Jesus’ victory to the world beyond the characters and the time of the story of Jesus.” Moloney, *John*, 531.

disciples, but also to a suffering with God in Christ. To allow the identity of Christ to expose and dismantle the domesticating tendencies of modernity is not wholly comfortable. The freedom to be truly loved and constituted from beyond oneself is inseparable from the freedom to be called out of the comfort of defining one's own identity, and called instead to participate in the identity of the one who gives his person for all.

Finally, in John's analogue to Acts 2,⁷¹ the glorified (i.e. crucified and risen) Christ breathes the Holy Spirit upon the disciples as God breathed life into Adam in Genesis.⁷² Here, says Bauckham, the disciples' participation in the activity of the Father in Christ ("as the Father has sent me") is enabled by their consecration—being made holy by the activity of the Spirit who draws them into unity with the Father and the Son.⁷³ All this—the giving of the Spirit, by which the disciples participate in the reconciliation of the world to God the Father in Christ, at the heart of which is the exposure of and forgiveness of sin—is inseparable from Jesus' unsubstitutable transcendence as the crucified and risen (glorified) one. The pneumatological dimension of the theology of the transcendence of Jesus proposed above is thus reflected back to us by this passage. It is the Spirit from whom Christians receive, and by the Spirit that Christians participate in, the unsubstitutable person of Christ, transcendent in his scandalous and 'slippery' historical particularity.

This passage therefore provides us with the opportunity to come back to the narratives to reflect upon the way Frei and Bonhoeffer help us to think of Jesus' transcendence—i.e. the coming *to us* of the undomesticated, unsubstitutable wounded and risen one, who breaks through the boundaries set up by human beings, ushering us beyond them into participation in his life for the world. Furthermore, it is by the

⁷¹ On this narrative as John's equivalent to Pentecost, see, for example, Dunn, *The Christ*, 17; Brown, *John*, 1038–1039; Rae, 'Testimony', 299–300.

⁷² Murray Rae, 'The Testimony of Works in the Christology of John's Gospel', in Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (eds.), *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 299.

⁷³ "[W]hile the Word of God sets the disciples apart for mission (17:17) the Holy Spirit enables that fulfillment of that holiness in the carrying out of the mission ... If so, all of this gospel's holiness language coalesces around the consecration of Jesus and disciples: The Holy Father consecrates Jesus the Holy One, who consecrates himself so that the disciples may also be consecrated, participating in the holiness of Jesus and the Father through the Holy Spirit." Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 269.

gift of the Spirit that this life in Jesus Christ becomes possible for those whose locked door was transcended by the one in whom God the Father reconciles the world to Godself, and us who follow after them. The passage therefore also holds the Trinitarian and especially pneumatological dimensions highlighted above.

ii) *Towards theological self-awareness*

The implication throughout this project has been that thinking about the transcendence of Jesus while guided by Frei and Bonhoeffer enables both a robust commitment to the centrality of the unsubstitutable person of Jesus—which makes for a community’s confidence—on the one hand; and a sense of the impossibility of grasping and containing this transcendent person—which makes for an openness and flexibility about the Christian community—on the other. According to David Ford’s terms, neither wide-open religion (e.g. liberal Culture-Protestantism) nor closed religion (e.g. fundamentalism) can deal with the paradox at the heart of this kind of Christology—a paradox that calls a Christian community to a fundamental incapacity and extrinsic orientation that those two extremes struggle to embody. Indeed, if fundamentalism and liberal Culture Protestantism are sides of the same historical epistemological coin—operating as they do on the assumptions of notions of modernist rationality—then the particular paradox at the heart of this theology of Jesus’ transcendence critiques the same aspect in both of them, i.e. the presumed sufficiency of a human grasp of Christ. Therefore, if a Christian community is concerned to embody a middle way between closed-ness or wide-open-ness, this project suggests the importance of attention to the paradoxical transcendence of Jesus at the level of historical particularity: through spiritual disciplines, worship and liturgical praxis, engagement with the scriptures and discussion with one another. To come at it from another angle, where we come across extremes of closed or wide-open religion, attention to the Christological assumptions that may lie beneath them can give rise to an important set of critical questions aimed at mitigating those extremes. The analogy of self-awareness is helpful here, pointing as it does to the way a project like this can help a religious community discern important theological issues that can have a bearing on its character. To describe Christology in a confessional setting as enabling self-awareness is a rich analogy: the church community receives its own ‘self’,

its identity and its *telos* from Christ, the one who is wholly other and yet gives himself to the church.

To conclude, in similar and diverse ways, Frei and Bonhoeffer show us that holding onto a robust sense of Jesus' transcendence points us in the direction of the unsubstitutable paradox—the person of Jesus Christ, unsubstitutable in his being at one with God, revealed in the hiddenness of sinful flesh. They can do this more strongly together than separately, and especially when supplemented with a pneumatology focussed on the generosity of God, they illuminate the importance of a theology of Jesus' transcendence for the question of the 'middle way' on which they are both regularly put to use. Where Frei seeks to articulate a 'generous orthodoxy', I suggest that together Frei and Bonhoeffer enable us to articulate an orthodox generosity.

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